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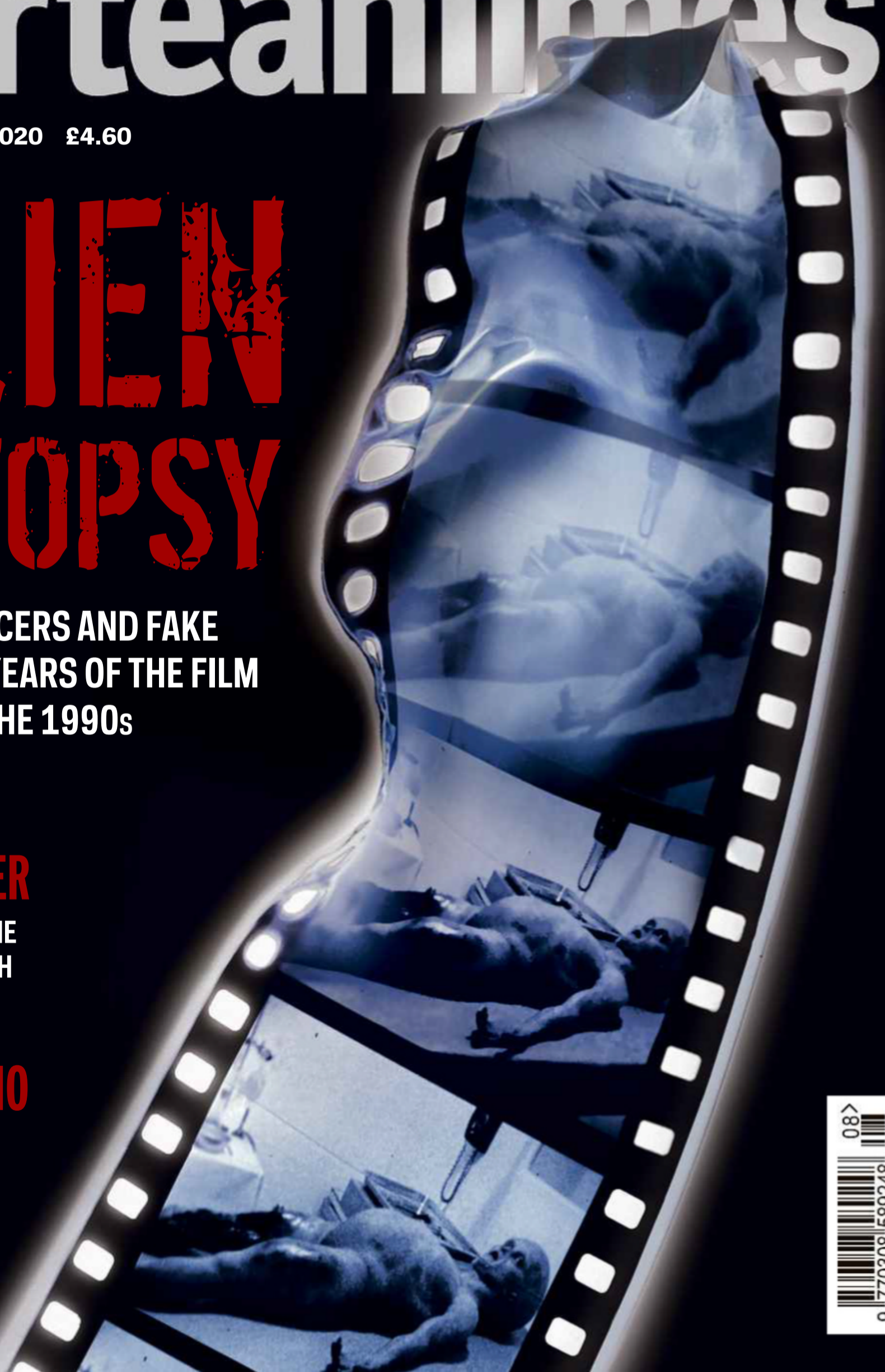
### **PERILS OF A PIXIE HUNTER**

ON THE TRAIL OF THE  
LITTLE PEOPLE WITH  
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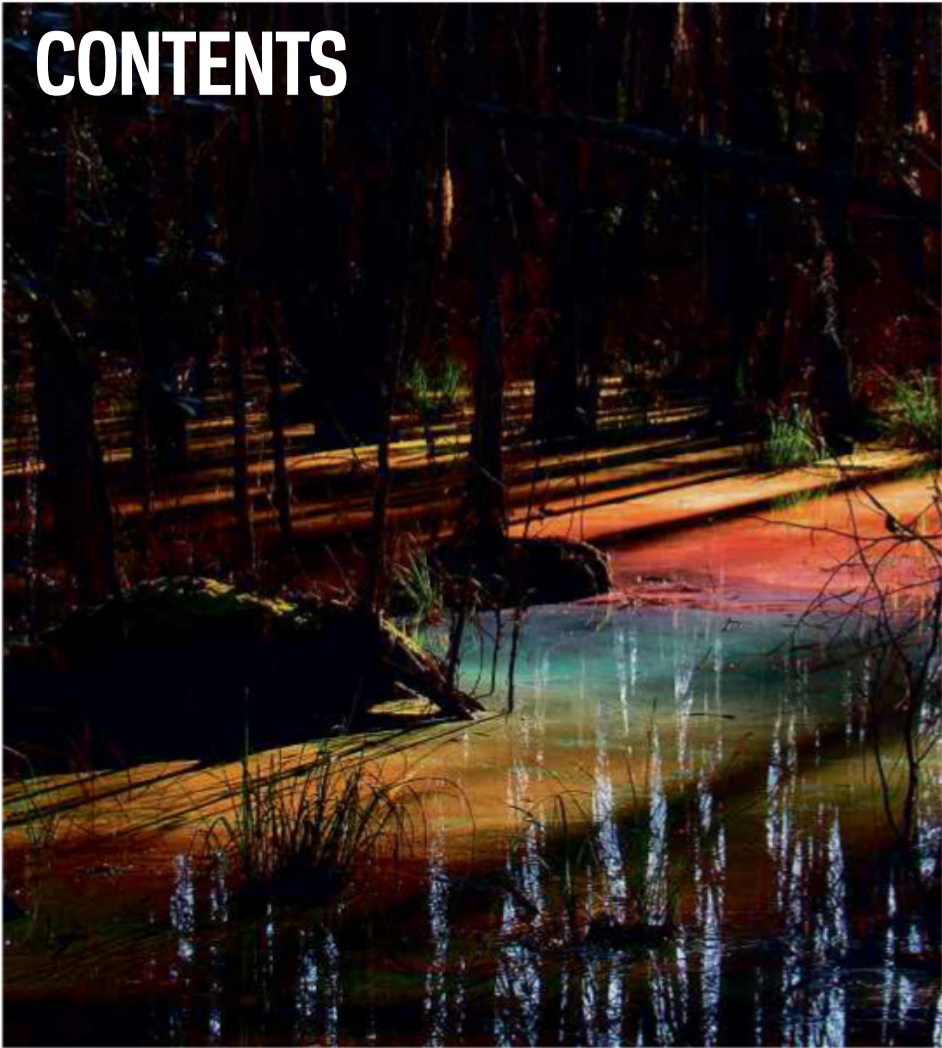


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FILM STRIP: SIMON HERRMANN/GANNET77/GETTY IMAGES

# FORTEAN TIMES 395

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Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

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## STRANGE DAYS

A digest of the worldwide weird, including: Cult killers, bloody miracles, porn star toad death, big cats on the prowl, and more...

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# EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

## HOW TO GET AHEAD IN UFOLOGY

This month, we go back to 1995, when forteana, for a while, went mainstream. *The X-Files* was bringing ufology and cryptozoology to TV screens around the world, talk of crashed saucers and government cover-ups was rife and *FT* enjoyed an enormous sales boost (albeit briefly) when the zeitgeist embraced strange phenomena in a big way. As Stu Neville notes in this month's cover feature (p.32), there couldn't have been a better moment for video entrepreneur Ray Santilli to drop his bombshell: actual film footage of a post mortem on a dead alien, carried out by the US military in the 1940s. Over the last 25 years, the saga of the 'Alien Autopsy' film has seen more twists and turns than a sack full of snakes, as Philip Mantle, who has spent decades trying to untangle them, reveals to Nigel Watson in an in-depth interview (p.37).

*FT* was there from the start, when a sceptical Bob Rickard was one of the first to see the footage at a 1995 screening. Things turned odd later that year when we received three photographs of what appeared to be a model of an alien head similar, but not identical, to that of the ET in the Santilli film; things got odder still when a package arrived at the *FT* offices containing the head itself (pictured right). Whether this 'fake' fake was intended to discredit Santilli's 'real' fake or was just a timely prank is unclear. The head itself has been on loan to the National Space Centre since 2001 (<https://collections.spacecentre.co.uk/object-l2001-21>). Elsewhere in this issue, you'll find more stories that blur the lines between fakery, fantasy and fact, as Bob Fischer goes in search of the elusive Erwin Saunders (p.46), whose pixie hunting videos are far and away the best thing on YouTube, and Noel Rooney enters the strange world of Austin Steinbart, who claims, among other things, to be the mysterious Q (p.42).

### GETTING COPIES OF FT

With shops having reopened, it will once again be possible to buy *FT* from your usual stockist. If you are still experiencing difficulties, or cannot go out, then copies for home delivery, including recent issues you might have missed, can be ordered here: <https://magsdirect.co.uk/magazine-category/entertainment/forteantimes/>. Taking out a subscription is, of course, the best way to guarantee your regular *FT* fix, and if you are able to support us in this way, then turn to p.58 for the latest offers.



### ERRATA

**FT390:47:** Rob Gandy emailed to point out "a small erratum in SD Tucker's 'Twilight of the (American) Gods', where we find the following statement: 'Shall I tell you the proper way to ask a question? You prostate yourself and ask.' This sounds decidedly difficult and probably painful! I suggest that the correct word should be 'prostrate'."

**FT392:58:** Jesse and Alex from Lewisham pointed out that *Train to Busan* was not director Bong Joon Ho's "breakthrough feature" – it was directed by Bong's peer, Yeon Sang-ho.

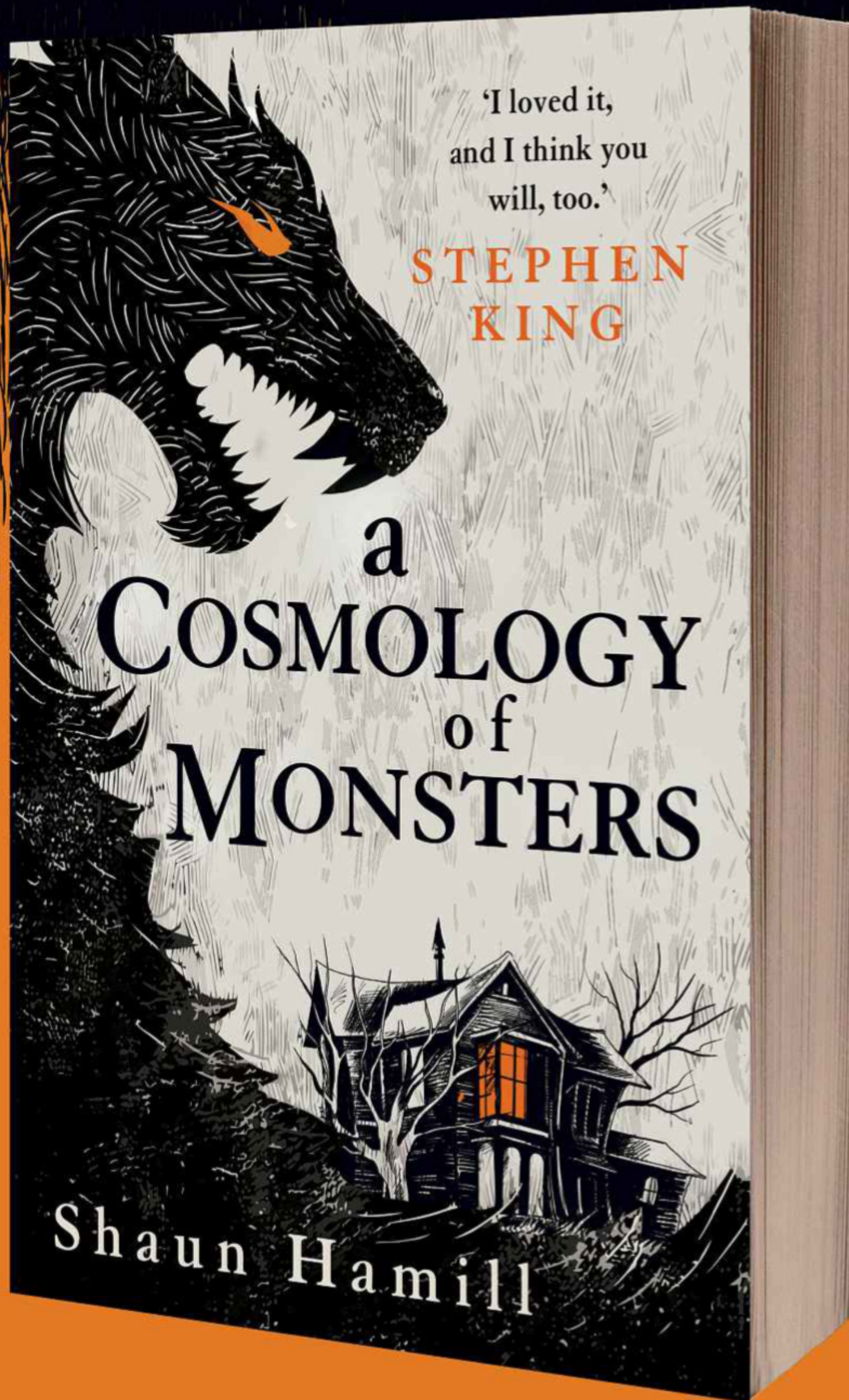
**FT392:48:** Peter Olausson, of Gothenburg, Sweden, spotted an error in Bob Rickard's article on the temptations of Christ. "The Philip you mention is not the Apostle, but another person known as Philip the Evangelist. They have been confused with each other very often indeed, so it's an error with quite a pedigree."

### NEW ADDRESS FOR FT NEWS CLIPPINGS

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## A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

# STRANGE DAYS

## IDAHO DOOMSDAY CULT

### Members of apocalyptic fringe Mormon group face multiple charges

Law enforcement authorities from several US states have been investigating the disappearance of two children in Idaho since autumn 2019. In early June 2020, police discovered charred human remains at the Rexburg, Idaho, home of Chad and Lori Daybell. The remains have since been proven to be those of Lori Daybell's children, Joshua "JJ" Vallow, seven, and his sister Tylee Ryan, 17. Chad Daybell, 51, is an author who has written several apocalyptic novels loosely based on Mormon religious teachings. He and his wife Lori Daybell, 46, have been involved in a group advocating preparation for the Apocalypse. The group, called 'Preparing A People', has denied being a cult.

Joshua and Tylee had not been seen since September 2019. Lori Daybell, also known as Lori Vallow, was arrested at her Hawaii holiday home in February 2020 and extradited to Idaho, whence she had fled the day after officials conducted a check on the family in November 2019. The home visit had been prompted by one of the children's grandparents expressing concern as to their whereabouts. During the visit, Lori Daybell gave misleading answers to investigators' questions, lied about the children's whereabouts and even their existence.

Authorities searching a nearby storage unit found toys and clothes belonging to the children. A search of Lori Daybell's car found Tylee's bank card, still active, and having been used since her disappearance. Officers from various states had been co-operating in the search for the



ABOVE: Joshua Vallow and Tylee Ryan, whose remains were found in June.

children who, they believed, were "in pretty serious danger".

Lori Daybell has been held in custody since February, charged with child abandonment, desertion, resisting or obstructing officers, contempt of court and criminal solicitation to commit a crime. Now her husband has also been taken into custody, charged with destroying or concealing two sets of human remains. County prosecutor Rob Wood believes Chad Daybell either concealed or helped conceal the remains, knowing they were about to be used as evidence in court. Wood argues the first body was hidden or destroyed sometime on or after 8 September, the last known day Tylee was seen, and the second body on or after 22 September, when Joshua was last seen.

Melanie Gibb, a friend of Lori Daybell, agreed to work with investigators after Daybell lied to police in Hawaii, telling them her children were with Melanie. Gibb told police that her former friend repeatedly referred to

her children as 'zombies,' by which she meant individuals whose mortal spirits had left their bodies, which were now the hosts of 'dark spirits'. Gibb recalled hearing Daybell calling her daughter Tylee a 'zombie' in spring 2019. She believes her former friend first learned the concept from Chad Daybell.

Based on Gibbs's testimony, the court heard of the couple's belief that when a zombie takes over a person's body, "the person's true spirit goes into 'limbo' and is stuck there until the host body is physically killed". And so, a court document stated: "Death of the physical body is seen as the mechanism by which the body's original spirit can be released from limbo." According to Gibb, the couple believed they were spiritual leaders, part of the 'Church of the Firstborn' whose mission was to lead the 144,000 mentioned in the Book of Revelation, and to rid the world of 'zombies'.

At least three more suspicious deaths have been linked to the

case. In April 2020, the Idaho Attorney General took over the investigation from the local county sheriff's office, and began looking into the death of Chad Daybell's previous wife, Tammy, with the couple named as defendants on suspicion of conspiracy, attempted murder and murder. Tammy was found dead in mysterious circumstances in Idaho in October 2019. Two weeks later, Lori Vallow married Chad Daybell in Hawaii – a month after her two children had last been seen. She had purchased a wedding ring from Amazon 17 days before Tammy's death, a ring that appears in the couple's wedding photos. Chad received \$430,000 (£350,000) from several life insurance policies after Tammy died. A former friend claimed Chad had predicted his wife's death some months before, and said her funeral had been rushed and perfunctory. Although her death was ascribed to natural causes at the time (she had allegedly died in her sleep), investigators later had her body exhumed from a Utah cemetery to conduct an autopsy.

Lori Vallow has been married five times. She moved to Idaho from Arizona in late August 2019 after her then husband Charles Vallow was shot dead by her brother, Alex Cox, who claimed it had been in self-defence. Cox himself later died on 12 December, the day after Tammy's exhumation, apparently from a blood clot in his lung. Lori's previous husband Joseph Ryan (Tylee's father) died of a heart attack in 2018. Five months prior to his death, Charles Vallow had removed his wife from a \$1 million (£783,000) life insurance policy and filed for divorce. During the divorce proceedings, Lori Vallow's religious beliefs were cited in court documents.

*(continued on p.7)*



## PAWS FOR THOUGHT

The latest outsized mogs prowling the UK

PAGE 8



## PORN STAR TOAD DEATH

Ritual using deadly venom goes wrong

PAGE 17



## USEFUL COVIDIOTS

Germany's pandemic protestors

PAGE 28

# THE CONSPIRASPHERE

Arguments are breaking out about whether, when it comes to COVID-19, the New Age community should embrace conspiracy theory. **NOEL ROONEY** suggests that it always has...

## CORONAVIRUS AND THE NEW AGE

Coronavirus has infected quite a number of world views and communities, and in recent weeks there have been mutterings about a very particular form of cross-infection. Commentators on the New Age, wellness, and spirituality have noted a shift among their peers towards belief in some of the conspiracy theories circulating with the advent of COVID-19. This has caused a lot of soul-searching; but perhaps some of the agonising stems from a misunderstanding.

There is a sense in most of these articles and blogs that the creep of conspiracist thinking into the more general realm of modern spirituality is in some sense novel; that, although there have always been some tenuous connections between these two alternative systems of thought and belief, they are in essence discrete worlds, and the apparently rising belief in coronavirus conspiracies is a sign of a puzzling malaise. But the conceptual worlds, as well as the communities, which embrace New Age beliefs, and those with a belief in conspiracy theories, have always overlapped, and that overlap is greater, and more historically rooted, than is generally acknowledged.

Notwithstanding the routine psychological profiling that makes a pathology of adherence to contemporarily heretical beliefs and the sneering mainstream implication that all believers in conspiracy theories and alternative forms of spirituality or wellbeing belong to the same category of simpleton, the similarities between the grand narrative of conspiracy theory and the metaphysical underpinnings of the New Age pre-date current circumstances. The Ascended Masters and the Illuminati are in many respects simply different faces of the same coin. The more public convergence of conspiracy theory and the New Age that we see currently, and which is provoking so much comment is, it seems to me, related directly to the nature of the situation we find ourselves in. The coronavirus pandemic

is a manifestation of forces at play that are clearly beyond the power of human institutions to control in any meaningful way. When the processes of human agency are so clearly undermined, it is not unnatural to wonder if another kind of agency is present. And when the threat is profoundly existential, the impulse to attribute agency is so much the stronger. There is a school of thought that sees this as a pre-modern disposition, as if being modern implies living in a random world where things merely happen; I think this view is arguable at best, and looks considerably less convincing in any situation where human existence is palpably threatened by a different order of being. A global health crisis, initiated by an entity about which we know surprisingly little, to the point where there is no real consensus on whether a virus is actually a living being or, as Rob Wallace puts it, "an industrial pollutant that evolves" (*Big Farms Make Big Flu: Dispatches on Influenza, Agribusiness, and the Nature of Science*, Monthly Review Press, 2016), surely represents such a situation.

Little wonder then, that a system of thought that makes doubt and suspicion axiomatic should be galvanised by coronavirus; or that it should occasionally express doubt about the reality or source of the threat. Equally, a belief system that espouses an alternative regimen of care of the self as a path to enlightenment is more or less compelled to engage with alternative aetiologies, when its adherents are just as threatened and affected by a global pandemic as the majority that believes in a medical orthodoxy which is signally failing to exert control over the perceived enemy in the war on sickness. And if the Conspirasphere seems to be the only place where such explanations are available, and a whole series of historical bridges to the Conspirasphere already exist for New Agers, it seems more or less inevitable that many people will make the crossing.

## EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

### MAN REMAINS IN CUSTODY AFTER DEATH

Middlesbrough Eve. Gazette, 31 Aug 2018.

### Dead cow kicks slaughterman

<i> 23 Feb 2019.

### IT LOOKED LIKE A SIMPLE DOMESTIC MURDER. THEN POLICE LEARNED ABOUT THE ALIEN REPTILE CULT.

Washington Post, 11 June 2019.

### Durham teen neo-Nazi became 'living dead'

BBC News, 20 Nov 2019.

### WHY DO WE FEAR THE GHOSTS OF DEAD POLICEMEN?

Irish Times, 11 Jan 2020.

### Judge to rule on racehorse who came back from the dead'

Irish Times, 28 Feb 2020.



# CORONAVIRUS CORNER

### Did COVID-19 escape from a Wuhan lab where it was deliberately created by Chinese scientists?

#### WUHAN LAB LEAK

Mobile phone data analysed by US intelligence agencies indicate there may have been an emergency shutdown at the Wuhan Institute of Virology in October 2019. A report obtained by NBC News said there was no mobile phone activity in a high-security area of the laboratory complex between 7 and 24 October. Previously there had been consistent mobile phone usage. The report, produced by an unknown private agency, suggested a “hazardous event” had taken place at the Institute’s National Biosafety Laboratory sometime between 6 and 11 October. The data also suggested roadblocks had been in place between 14 and 19 October.

It is believed that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was referring to this report when he stated there was a “significant amount of evidence” to indicate the virus had accidentally begun in the Wuhan lab. Experts have urged caution, warning that the report may have been based on limited commercially available data, or that there could be other reasons for the varying levels of mobile phone usage.

In an interview with Chinese state broadcaster CGTN, the lab’s director, Wang Yanyi, confirmed they had been working on three live strains of bat coronavirus, but denied any of them matched the SARS-CoV-2 virus that caused the pandemic. “Our institute first received the clinical sample of the unknown pneumonia on 30 December last year,” she claimed. “How could it have leaked from our lab when we never had it?”

Until the end of May, the prevailing view was that the virus had originated in Wuhan’s wet market, but a new study by the

Chinese Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) took samples of animals from the market and found none with coronavirus. Instead, the market is now being seen as the site of a ‘super-spreader’ event. Colin Carlson, a zoologist at Georgetown University, said the wet market was probably the point where one sick person infected a large number of others. “It turns out that the wet market was a victim of the virus,” said the Chinese CDCP. Genetic evidence has confirmed the virus originated in Chinese bats before jumping to humans, but Carlson cautioned that it could take years to discover exactly how the virus jumped from animals to humans and where this had occurred.

In December 2019, the majority of the original 41 cases of COVID-19 reported to the WHO were linked to the 116 acre-market, leading to its closure on 1 January. But the virus could have been circulating in Wuhan before those first 41 cases were reported, and, in fact, 13 of those original cases showed no link to the wet market, according to Chinese CDCP research. This means the virus will likely have been spreading undetected in the human population around Wuhan for weeks before the ‘super spreader event’ at the market. *S.Telegraph, 10 May; theguardian.com, 24 May; daily-mail.co.uk. 29 May 2020.*

#### AN ENGINEERED VIRUS?

Despite the prevailing view that the SARS-CoV-2 virus causing coronavirus illness is natural in origin, having jumped from animals to humans, a team of Australian scientists claim to have found evidence that the virus is “uniquely adapted to infect humans”, adding fuel to theories that it was artificially created in a laboratory. Beijing’s

refusal to allow an international investigation has only increased suspicion.

Nikolai Petrovsky, a professor of medicine at Adelaide’s Flinders University and a leading vaccine researcher who headed the Australian team, said the virus was “not typical of a normal zoonotic [animal to human] infection”, because at its very first appearance it arrived with the “exceptional” ability to enter human bodies. Prof Petrovsky, who runs a biotech research unit that intends to commence human trials for a COVID-19 vaccine, admitted the virus could have emerged from an animal through “a freak event of nature”, but does not rule out the possibility of a laboratory accident causing leakage, adding: “I haven’t seen a zoonotic virus that has behaved in this way before.” New viruses crossing over from animals typically strengthen as they adapt to their human hosts, he explained. Unusually, however, this new coronavirus arrived perfectly adapted to infect humans from the outset, without needing to evolve.

Citing the “coincidence” that the most closely related known viruses were being studied in Wuhan’s Institute of Virology, Petrovsky suggested that while no hard evidence for a leak had yet emerged, there was “enough circumstantial data to concern us.” It was, he said, “very unusual” for an “exquisitely human adaptive virus” to have suddenly crossed from an animal host to humans. “This is either a remarkable coincidence or a sign of human intervention,” he said, while conceding the possibility of the virus being “a fluke event” for which “humans were the perfect host.”

Biosecurity expert Richard Ebright argued that the odds of a new virus containing such

unusual features occurring naturally were “possible – but improbable.” Ebright, professor of chemical biology at New Jersey’s Rutgers University, alleges Wuhan scientists were creating chimeric coronaviruses and seeking funding to test their ability to infect human cells while using procedures that leave no sign of human manipulation. Asked about a leak, he replied: “There definitely is a possibility. But there is no basis to say a high probability.” One hypothesis is that the virus was inadvertently carried to the wet market by someone already infected following the lab leak.

The Australian study looked at the ‘spike protein’ that binds Sars-CoV-2 to human body cells. Another study, posted on Cornell University’s website but not yet peer-reviewed, arrived at similar results. Using computer modelling to test the spike protein’s ability to bind to humans and 12 possible animal hosts, the Cornell researchers were “surprised” to find the virus “already pre-adapted to human transmission”, contrasting its stability with the coronavirus responsible for the 2002-04 SARS epidemic, which had adapted and mutated as it spread around the population. Sars-CoV-2’s ability to bind to human cells far exceeded its ability to do so in other species. “This indicates Sars-CoV-2 is a highly adapted human pathogen,” said the Cornell study, “raising questions as to whether it arose in nature by a rare chance event or whether its origins lie elsewhere.”

Citing another study by British and Norwegian researchers, Sir Richard Dearlove, head of MI6 until 2014, said in early June he believed the coronavirus pandemic may have “started as an accident,” with the virus escaping from a Chinese



laboratory. These researchers claim to have found evidence of gene-splicing, with clues suggesting key elements were inserted into the virus's genetic sequence and may not have evolved naturally. The study, co-authored by Professor Angus Dalglish of St George's, University of London, had been rejected by various journals and rewritten several times to remove accusatory claims about China before being published in the *Quarterly Review of Biophysics Discovery*. Initial co-author John Fredrik Moxnes, a chief scientific adviser to the Norwegian military, reportedly asked for his name to be removed. The researchers are still seeking a publisher for a new paper, which argues that COVID-19 is a "remarkably well-adapted virus for human co-existence" and claims it is likely to be the result of a laboratory experiment to produce "chimeric viruses of high potency".

However, health secretary Matt Hancock said the UK government has seen no evidence to indicate the virus originated in a laboratory. Virologist Simon Wain-Hobson at Paris's Pasteur Institute insisted that the body of evidence suggested a natural virus. "You would see signatures if this was an engineered virus," he said, "and I don't see any evidence that it is engineered."

The Wuhan Institute of Virology was established in 2004 in response to the previous year's SARS outbreak. The then French President, Jacques Chirac, pushed for the lab to be set up on a collaborative basis, offering French funding and expertise in return for a share of the intellectual copyright on the lab's discoveries. France is a global leader in virus research, but Chirac also saw the deal as a means to forge stronger trade links with China. The deal went ahead, despite French intelligence

warnings that China's poor bio-security could lead to a catastrophic leak. Intelligence advisors also warned that Paris could lose control of the project, even suggesting Beijing could harness the technology to manufacture biowarfare weapons. When the lab opened 11 years later, the French architects of the project complained that, as feared, they had been ousted by the Chinese communist government.

A report in *Le Figaro* featured France's General Directorate for External Security (equivalent to MI6) expressing repeated concerns about a lack of transparency and a lack of international control over Chinese laboratories. "What you have to understand is that a P4 [high-level bio-security] laboratory is like a nuclear reprocessing plant. It's a bacteriological atomic bomb," said one source. "The viruses that are tested are extremely dangerous – diving suits, decontamination airlocks etc must be followed to the letter." Up to 50 French scientists were expected to travel to Wuhan to help run the laboratory, but never went. The Institute became operational in January 2018. Alain Merieux, the French billionaire instrumental in financing the Wuhan laboratory in partnership with his Institut Merieux in Lyons, abandoned the project in 2015, saying: "I am giving up the co-chairmanship of [the] P4 [laboratory], a Chinese tool. It belongs to them, even if it was developed with technical assistance from France." A security services source involved in the case at the time said: "The Chinese laboratories were not inspiring a great deal of trust, but the government had its own reasons for progressing with this," namely, to develop a vaccine against future coronaviruses like SARS. *dailymail.co.uk*, 23 May; *independent.co.uk*, 4 June 2020.

Charles stated that his wife believed she was "receiving spiritual revelations and visions to help her gather and prepare those chosen to live in the New Jerusalem after the Great War as prophesied in the Book of Revelation." She believed herself to be "a god assigned to carry out the work of the 144,000 at Christ's second coming in July 2020." He described her as "infatuated and, at times, obsessive about near-death experiences and spiritual visions." She had allegedly threatened to kill him if he attempted to thwart her plans, claiming she had "an angel there to help her dispose of the body." Following this threat, Vallow had taken out a protection order.

Chad Daybell told reporters he had written over 25 books since leaving an editorial job with local Utah newspaper the *Standard-Examiner*. He also began work as a sexton in a local cemetery; his book *One Foot in the Grave* deals with this period. His 2017 autobiography *Led by The Hand of Christ* details an interview with a woman who claimed to have had a near-death experience, meeting Jesus on the Other Side. It also describes his encounters with the spirits of deceased relatives, and visions of "the decline and downfall of the United States" together with an "upcoming foreign invasion of America". He has also written a five-book fiction series, *Standing in Holy Places*, concerned with Latter-Day Saints prophecies about the end of the world, the Second Coming, and the establishment of the New Jerusalem in the US. He was expelled from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in 2019 after declaring himself a prophet.

A series of emails sent by Daybell to Lori Vallow concerned "seven missions to accomplish together". These included "translating ancient records, writing a book about it, identifying locations in Arizona for 'white camps', the presidency of the Church of Firstborn, establish food distribution as the tribulations start, ordain individuals to translation and provide supplies to righteous members of families". An email

she sent to Daybell had asked him to evaluate whether her two children were "light or dark spirits". His reply assessed several members of her family on a scale of one to four, based on a belief that people are reborn or 'graduate' to the next level after death. Most members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he wrote, are level two, and "the dark side can only match the light, not exceed it."

Brandon Boudreaux, whose ex-wife Melani is Chad Daybell's niece, told reporters how Melani had followed her aunt into the apocalyptic 'Preparing a People' group. Describing it as a cult, Brandon said that Melani had demanded a divorce soon after she began spending more time with Chad Daybell and the group. He also fears the recent deaths of several family members may be connected, and even suggested that Melani had been responsible for a drive-by shooting outside his Arizona home in August 2019.

Joshua's grandmother, Kay Woodcock, said Lori had been a "wonderful, loving, attentive mother" to Joshua, adopting him with her then husband Charles Vallow in 2013, but noted that "things started changing... when she began spending all her time with a new religious group, that we refer to as a 'cult'." Mrs Woodcock and her husband said they last saw their grandchildren in August 2019. "Something happened to her," said Mrs Woodcock. "She just turned off and once she got involved with that cult with Daybell... the person we knew just went away."

Asked about the cult, Brandon Boudreaux said: "I think it's an infatuation with the end of the world and an infatuation with power, and they're using it to try to make money off of people's beliefs." *dailymail.com*, 23 Dec 2019+6+26 Mar+12 Apr 2020; *nypost.com*, 1 Jan; *eastidahonews.com*, 14 Feb; *nytimes.com*, 21 Feb; *huffpost.com*, 2 Mar; *eu.usatoday.com*, 5 Mar; *metro.co.uk*, 6 Mar; *deseret.com*, 6 Mar; *Sun*, 1 Apr; 29 June; *kutv.com*, 15 May; *amp.cnn.com*, 9 June; *BBC News*, 10 June; *apnews.com*, 11 June; *nbcnews.com*, 13 June; *upi.com*, 22 June; *9news.com.au*, 29 June 2020.

## SIDELINES...

### FLAMES OF PASSION

A Canadian businessman was so determined that his ex-wife shouldn't receive the child and spousal support awarded by a court that he set fire to over \$1 million (£575,000). A judge, sentencing Bruce McConville, 55, to 30 days' jail, said: "I find what you have done to be morally quite reprehensible." *D.Mirror*, 8 Feb 2020.

### BABOONS ON THE RUN

Three baboons stunned onlookers in Sydney, Australia, after escaping from their cage inside a hospital. The primates, bred for medical research, had been transferred to the Royal Prince Alfred hospital so one could have a vasectomy. After making their way outside, the baboons were later recaptured in a nearby building. *BBC News*, 26 Feb 2020.

### LET THERE BE MORE LIGHT

A couple living in a lower-ground floor flat were deprived of light for a year when builders working on a church next door blocked their windows. Actors Cengiz Dervis and Silvia Busuioc, who had no natural light in their living room and hall, claim a workman yelled that "they had no right to light". *Sun*, 20 Apr 2020.

### HEDGEHOG JAIL BREAK

Hedgehogs living in a wildlife haven in a prison's grounds have escaped and are on the run. Prisoners at Dovegate prison, Staffordshire, had built gates so that the spiny creatures could move in and out of the Category B private jail's gardens as they wished. But the so-called 'HMP Hog Gate' is now empty, all 12 hogs having done a runner. *Sun*, 11 Apr 2020.



## EASY AS ABC

Reports of Alien Big Cats continue to make the news, with sightings from Bodmin to Bowness



ABOVE: One of the photos of the mystery cat seen near Bowness-on-Windermere and posted to Facebook. BELOW RIGHT: A large paw print left by the Birstall big cat.

### BEAST OF CUMBRIA

A woman driving to work said she spotted a "muscular" cat-like animal eating a pigeon near Bowness-on-Windermere in Cumbria. She took three photos of the creature, which was, she says, the size of a collie dog. The photos were uploaded to Facebook where big cat enthusiasts suggested variously the animal to be a young puma, caracal, or jungle cat. The witness herself had initially thought it to be a lynx, "but the markings are not there and the tail is too long. I don't think he had tufted ears but they had black tips". There have been over 40 sightings of a black panther or puma in the southern Lake District region since 2003. *Daily Mail*, 23 Apr 2020.

### RAILWAY PROWLER

A dog walker saw a "large cat" near Spotted Birstall, Leicestershire, while walking along the track beside the Great Central Railway line. At around 4pm he had reached the A46 bridge when he saw a large cat staring at him. It turned away and his dog gave chase, but "this cat stopped running and went for my dog." The man stated that his pet weighs 51kg (8st), but was still smaller than the feline, which only ceased its attack when he shouted at it.

Commentators on a local online forum where the witness's

account was posted said there had been other sightings in the same area; one resident recalled seeing a big cat climbing a tree by the railway 20 years ago. Another wrote: "There have been rumours of a puma that lives on the railway line for as long as I can remember." The day before this latest sighting, a dead wild boar was found on a country road four miles (6km) away at Shepshead, where, according to Chris Mullins of Beastwatch UK, a big cat was recently sighted. Mullins visited the area and photographed a large paw print, which, he said, suggests a paw of about one-and-a-half to two inches (4-5cm). He pointed out the absence of claw marks (dogs leave claw marks, whereas cats retract their claws when walking). *Leicester Mercury*, 4+5 May 2020.

### BIG AND BLACK

54-year-old civil servant Lynda Elliott was walking her dog in a field near her home in Emerson's Green near Hucklechurch, Gloucestershire. She was startled to see a large animal "the size of a black Labrador". "It was a big black cat, it could have only been 150 yards maximum from me," she said. She watched it jumping and pouncing in the long grass, and only left when it began to walk towards her, apparently having detected her scent. She insisted the creature was not a

dog, describing it as longer than it was tall. She said she could not see its tail or ears, however. A Gloucestershire big cat expert has suggested that sightings may be more frequent during lockdown, as wildlife return to urban areas. *gloucestershirelive.co.uk*, 11 May 2020.

### FEN TIGER

A Labrador-sized cat was spotted by a Cambridge homeowner as it prowled in his garden. He described the creature, which he said he has seen before, as "brown and black with a very long tail that had lots of black circles on it. Its legs were thick with big claws". He suggested it keeps returning to hunt rabbits or small mammals. There have been reports of the so-called 'Fen Tiger' in the area for the past 30 years. *Sun*, 14 Apr 2020.

### BEAST OF BODMIN BACK

A large black cat was spotted near Tedburn St Mary, Devon, in an area where a decapitated lamb had recently been found. A local resident who managed to photograph the creature said: "I was in my garden today when I saw this black cat-looking thing in the field. It appeared to be mauling something in the grass. It got scared by my presence and this was when you could tell it was a large cat, from the way it ran through the long grass." The sighting came days after another Devon resident had photographed large, four-clawed feline paw prints in Holbeam Wood, Newton Abbot. He also said that he had recently come across animals remains, including deer legs, while walking his dog.

Rumours of big cats lurking on the moors across Devon





and Cornwall have circulated for decades. Sightings of the so-called Beasts of Bodmin, Exmoor, or Dartmoor have been attributed to the release of three pumas into the wild over 40 years ago. Benjamin Mee, owner of Dartmoor Zoo, claimed in July 2019 that circus entertainer and former Plymouth Zoo owner Mary Chipperfield had set the trio of felines free after her zoo was forced to close in 1978. Dartmoor Zoo was expecting five pumas be transferred to them, but rather than surrender them to another zoo, Ms Chipperfield is thought to have released her favourite breeding pair into the wild, plus a young male to keep them company. However, Dr Terry Moore of the Cat Survival Trust pointed out that these animals would have long since died of old age. *thesun.co.uk*, 16 May 2020.

## BARNET BIG CAT

Armed police were called to an address in Winnington Road, Barnet, on 25 May, responding to reports of a large cat in a garden. Winnington Road is situated in a prosperous area of north London, running parallel to The Bishops Avenue (aka Millionaires Row). Residents were initially told the animal was a tiger or leopard, but the Metropolitan Police subsequently confirmed the animal was a Savannah cat. A statement read: "An animal expert attended and visually assessed the cat. Their conclusion was that the animal was a hybrid, namely a cross-breed of a domestic cat and a serval. The expert opinion was that this animal was not dangerous and not a threat to the public." Neither the cat nor its owner has been located. *mylondon.news*, 27 May 2020.

## COTSWOLDS PANTHER

At the beginning of June, Ellie Haggart, 27, was walking her French bulldog, Oscar, in South Cerney village, 5.5 miles (9km) south of Cirencester, when she saw what she insists was a "panther". Ms Haggart had been walking along Wildmoorway Lane near the Cotswold Water Park, an area with over 140 lakes. "I didn't know what it was at first but I knew it was pretty big," she recalled. "I wanted to assume



ABOVE: A better class of big cat was seen in one of North London's most expensive streets. BELOW: Juliet Simpson with the sculpture that started a Kentish cat-flap.

it was an extremely large dog... and then I could start to see certain defining characteristics of the animal, like the feline movement of the shoulders and the difference in the shape of its legs compared to that of a dog." She wasn't sure if the felid had seen her and her dog, but admits to being "terrified" when the animal "started prowling slowly in our direction."

Three weeks earlier, three sisters had a similar sighting 22 miles (35km) away on the other side of the Cotswolds. They were out on their daily walk at Robinswood Hill and "could not believe their eyes" when a big cat crossed the footpath in front of them and walked off into a wooded area. They returned later, hoping to see it again, but it didn't reappear. Gloucestershire Constabulary's Rural Crime Team have appealed for anyone with further information to come forward. *itv.com*, 8 June 2020.

## PAPER TIGER

Armed police and a helicopter were scrambled after reports

of a tiger on the loose in the Kent countryside, but found a life-size model instead. Officers responding to the call at Ightham, near Underriver, were met by the sculpture's creator, artist Juliet Simpson, 85, who had been alerted by a neighbour that an armed response team was looking for a big cat. Her wire and resin creation had been placed in woodland about 30m (98ft) away from a public footpath over 20 years ago. "When I put this one in the wood behind my house, he seemed to sort of own the wood, so I never sold him, so he's just sat there," Ms Simpson explained, adding that despite having now become "rather dilapidated", her model tiger still appears convincing, partly because of its distance from the footpath. "It looks quite real – it's meant to look real," she added. A Kent Police statement reassured the public that following a search of the area, they had established there to be no big cat present, and that the public were not at risk. *BBC News*, 3 Apr 2020.



## SIDELINES...

### DEAD AS DILLINGER?

US officials have approved a request by relatives of the notorious gangster John Dillinger to have his body exhumed. The FBI say they shot him dead in Chicago's Biograph Theatre in 1934, but relatives have long suspected that an imposter was buried in his place. The cemetery has to date blocked the request. (*Ireland*) *S.Independent*, 6 Oct 2019.

### BRAINY BACTERIA

In a Tokyo University experiment, strains of *E. coli* were able to solve a simplified sudoku puzzle. The problem-solving bacteria were able to complete the four-by-four grid as part of an MIT International Genetically Engineered Machine competition, by expressing four different colours, each of which had a numerical value. *D.Mail*, 10 Dec 2019.

### BREAST DEFENCE

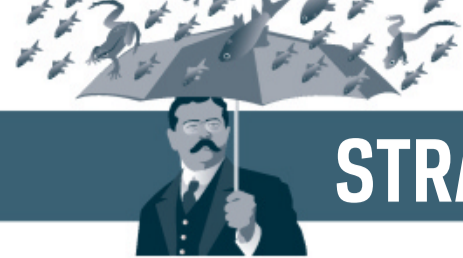
Doctors said a woman's silicone breast implants probably saved her life after she was shot in the chest at close range in Toronto, Canada, in 2018. A case study published in a medical journal found the 30-year-old woman's left breast implant had deflected the bullet away from her vital organs and into her other breast. *D.Telegraph*, 23 Apr 2020.

### ULURU 'CURSE'

Last October, a law came into force banning tourists from climbing the sacred Aboriginal mountain Uluru (formerly known as Ayers Rock). The imminent ban triggered a rush of visitors eager to climb the rock, despite a sign reading: 'This is our home. Please don't climb.' Professor Marcia Langton, chair of Melbourne University's Australian Indigenous Studies department announced: "A curse will fall on all of them". *Irish Examiner*, 26 Oct 2019.

### BLUE STREAK

22-year-old car driver Sky Blue (yes, her real name) was involved in a crash in Las Cruces, New Mexico. The other woman driver exited her vehicle but, rather than provide Ms Blue with her insurance details, proceeded to strip naked and walk down the road. "I thought she was going to fight me," said Ms Blue. "I was kind of confused." *D.Mirror*, 11 Apr 2020.



## SIDELINES...

### ECO PABLO

Hippos imported by narcotics kingpin Pablo Escobar for his private zoo have had an unexpectedly beneficial impact on Colombia's ecosystem, say researchers. The estimated 80-100 hippos living in the country's waterways are regarded by experts as having replaced extinct species such as giant llamas. *Sun*, 24 Mar 2020.

### JAIL BIRD

A habitual criminal nicknamed Billy the Pigeon has been jailed at Newcastle Crown Court for his 464th offence. William Armstrong, 46, who has over 100 burglary convictions, was told by the judge as she sentenced him to two years' imprisonment: "Billy the Pigeon, you are a burglar by profession." *Sun*, 9 Apr 2020.

### CAREER CRIMINAL

Britain's most prolific criminal has been jailed again after being convicted of his 669th offence. Patrick Ryan returned to prison after breaching a supervision order, having earlier been sentenced to 18 months in 2018 for urinating on a bus, exposing himself to passengers and groping a woman. Ryan, an alcoholic who began drinking aged 13, has served various prison sentences for fraud and theft offences. *D.Mail*, 27 Apr 2020.

### ICE CREAM PROTEST

A Hong Kong ice cream parlour is offering a new flavour – tear gas. The main ingredient is black peppercorns, reminiscent of the pungent, peppery rounds fired by police during 2019's pro-democracy demonstrations. "We would like to make a flavour that reminds people that they still have to persist in the protest movement," said the owner. *apnews.com*, 15 May 2020.



MARTIN ROSS

## BOOK OF DEATH

The autobiography that launched a fatal quest for a hidden treasure chest



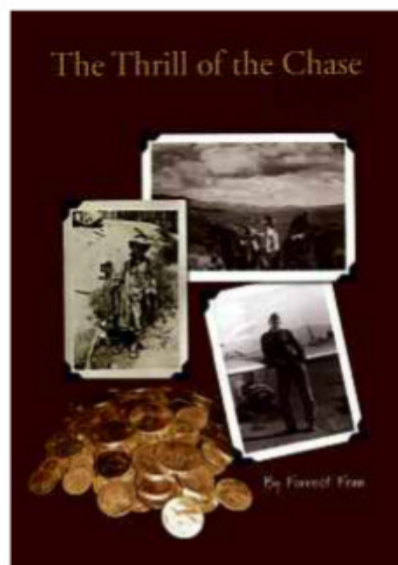
DALNETZEL.COM

**ABOVE:** The photo sent to author Forrest Fenn by the apparent discoverer of the treasure chest. **BELOW:** The book that started it all – and which led to five deaths.

### BOOK OF DEATH

A fabled treasure chest filled with gold and jewels has reportedly been found, 10 years after author and millionaire Forrest Fenn hid it in a remote location, and not before the treasure hunt, sparked by lines in his autobiography *The Thrill of the Chase*, had indirectly caused the deaths of five men. The memoir charts Fenn's life from his Texan childhood to being given three years to live following a cancer diagnosis 30 years ago (Fenn, now 89, is still alive). In between, he recalls his 20 years' service in the United States Air Force, including being twice shot down over Vietnam. But a cryptic poem at the end of the book is what captivated numerous treasure seekers and also brought about the fatalities.

The poem contains clues which, if decoded, would lead to a treasure chest hidden somewhere in the Rocky Mountains. The chest is believed to be filled with hundreds of gold coins, rubies, sapphires, emeralds and diamonds, and gold. The contents of the



Romanesque bronze chest, 10in (25cm) square and weighing 40lb (18kg) have been valued at £1.6million, although some estimate its worth as high as £4million. Fenn envisaged the treasure hunt as a way to encourage others to explore the American outdoors. "I wanted to get people out enjoying nature," he said. "I've had such fun over the past 75 years looking for arrowheads and fossils and strange things out in forests and along the river banks. Why not give others the opportunity to do the same thing?"

An estimated 100,000 people have attempted to locate the chest since the book's publication in 2010. The first fatality came when Randy Bilyeu, 54, disappeared in near-zero temperatures while searching in New Mexico in 2016. He had moved from Florida to Colorado to be near the Rocky Mountains, where he believed the chest was hidden. His skeletal remains were discovered a year later. Jeff Murphy, 53, was next to die. In June 2017, Murphy, of Batavia, Illinois, fell 500ft (152m) down a slope in Wyoming's Yellowstone National Park. One week later, the body of Pastor Paris Wallace, 52, from Grand Junction, Colorado, was found by the Rio Grande days after he had told his family he was searching for the treasure. Eric Ashby, 31, had moved to the Rockies and was found dead beside Colorado's Arkansas River in late 2017. And in March 2020, Michael Sexson, 53, was found dead in a remote area near Dinosaur National Monument, a vast nature reserve spanning Utah and Colorado. His 65-year-old travelling companion was rescued, barely alive.

Commenting on the deaths, Fenn said: "It's tragic and heart-breaking... I certainly didn't anticipate anyone was going to get killed." He resisted calls to remove the treasure, saying: "Searchers have spent money and vacation time looking for the treasure, and I don't feel I could do that, even if I wanted to." Instead of putting an end to the deadly treasure-seeking, Fenn begged searchers to use common sense. "Don't look for the treasure any place where a 79-year-old couldn't have taken it." He said the chest was concealed somewhere in the mountains, above 5,000ft (1,524m) and below 10,200ft (3,100m). "I never said it was buried," he added. "I hid it."

The book and its quest led to intruders breaking into Fenn's New Mexico home looking for clues and even making death threats. Some have accused him of an elaborate fraud designed to



ABOVE: The dead treasure hunters (left to right): Rancy Bilyeu, Jeff Murphy, Paris Wallace, Eric Ashby and Michael Sexson.

sell his book, but Fenn insists the filled chest was viewed by 100 people before he concealed it.

The story is reminiscent of the frenzy inspired by British author Kit Williams's 1979 bestseller *Masquerade*, whose illustrations contained clues that led to a jewelled golden hare. Williams's book was the forerunner of subsequent 'armchair treasure hunt' books, including Fenn's, and was not without controversy. In 1982, Williams was contacted by a 'Ken Thomas' who submitted a rough map of the treasure's location; he was adjudged to have won and was awarded the prize. It later emerged that 'Thomas' was a friend of the author's ex-girlfriend. She had overheard details of where Williams had buried the hare and passed on the information. The secret code

*"It had not moved from the spot where I hid it 10 years ago"*

was correctly cracked in 1988 by two physics teachers, but the prize had already been awarded.

Finally, after more than a decade of searching and five dead men, Fenn's treasure chest has been found in the Rocky Mountains. On his personal website, Fenn announced on 6 June that a man from "back East" had finally tracked it down: "It was under a canopy of stars in the lush, forested vegetation of the Rocky Mountains and had not moved from the spot where

I hid it more than 10 years ago." He added that he did not know the man's identity, but that the poem in his autobiography had led the man to the exact spot. Fenn also told the *Santa Fe New Mexican* that the winner didn't want his name released, but had confirmed his find by sending a photo. Asked how he felt about the treasure being found, Fenn said: "I don't know. I feel halfway kind of glad, halfway kind of sad because the chase is over."

However, not everyone is convinced. "I believe he never hid the treasure," said Linda Bilyeu, ex-wife of the first casualty of the treasure hunt, Randy Bilyeu. "He needed attention and this is how he got it." CBS News pointed out that Fenn had so far provided no proof that the treasure had been found, despite his 6 June statement that more information and photos would be released.

The news of the treasure's discovery was met with dismay by treasure hunters, who have dedicated much time and money to hunting for the chest. "This has been a horrible ending to something that has been so extremely important in my life for eight years," said Cynthia Meachum, member of a community of Fenn treasure seekers. "It has affected me a lot more than I thought it ever would."

Some people are said to have resigned from work and spent their life savings in pursuit of the hoard. "Give us something, so we know if we were close," said Meachum, who says she has made 200 trips and spent thousands of hours in her quest. "I have no closure at this point." *D.Express*, 3 Apr; *wired.com*, 29 May; *nationalinterest.org*, 3 June; *oldsantafetradingco.com*, 6 June; *BBC News*, 8 June; *theguardian.com*, 11 June; *cbsnews.com*, 14 June; *westword.com/news*, 15 June 2020.



## SIDELINES...

### DEAD TIRED

Relatives of a man who had died during Ecuador's coronavirus epidemic attempted to smuggle his body past a checkpoint in a Jeep by claiming he was asleep. Footage showed a soldier asking the family to "wake the gentleman up, please". *Metro*, 15 Apr 2020.

### GIRDING HIS LOINS

A former demolition worker on trial for indecent exposure claimed a brain injury from a steel girder in the early 1990s turned him into a flasher. Shane Rees was accused of standing naked at his window while performing a sex act for over 30 minutes, but said he had no memory of the episode. The court heard how the 44-year-old's offences began in 1996 and tended to coincide with alcohol binges. He was given a six-month suspended sentence and ordered to complete an alcohol rehabilitation course. *Sun*, 14 Mar 2020.

### CATCH A FIRE

A cannabis grower accidentally set fire to his home in Nuneaton while burning waste in his garden. Firefighters discovered a "substantial" drug factory with 130 plants worth around £36,000. Ian Armstrong, 43, was given a suspended sentence and ordered to pay £20,000 under the 2002 Proceeds of Crime Act. *Metro*, 21 Apr 2020.

### MAN BITES DOG

A man went on the rampage at Liverpool's Lime Street station, flinging an elderly woman's crutches down the stairs while "lashing out at strangers" according to a witness who saw him attack a woman whose dog had barked at him. He then bit the dog. Police arrested a 24-year-old man for affray. *Metro*, 28 Nov 2019.

### PARTY POOPERS

Officials for the Swedish city of Lund fenced off a park where revellers traditionally gather for Walpurgis Night celebrations, and created a further deterrent by spreading a ton of chicken droppings in the park. "It's not very pleasant to sit around drinking beer in that smell," said a city environmental officer. *D.Mail*, 30 Apr 2019.



# STRANGE DAYS

## SIDELINES...

### SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP

Rhinos accompanied by red-billed oxpeckers are warned of approaching humans by the birds 40 to 50 per cent of the time, whereas those without oxpeckers only notice humans in 23 per cent of cases. The oxpeckers feed off ticks and maggots on black rhinos' hides, and the more birds they carry, the greater the detection distance. Noted for their poor eyesight, black rhinos are endangered due to poaching. *D.Mail, 10 Apr 2020.*

### UNWISE OWL

Traffic officers attended an unusual incident: an owl stuck on the northbound central reservation of the A483 running between Chester and Wrexham. Having rescued the unfortunate bird of prey, they were called out again three hours later when the owl managed to get itself stuck under a flyover. (*North Wales*) *D.Post, 10 Feb 2020.*

### YOGHURT ASSAULT

A 41-year-old New South Wales man was charged with indecent assault after allegedly touching an 18-year-old woman and attempting to spoon-feed her with yoghurt. *Courier-Mail (Queensland), 30 Dec 2019.*

### MEMENTO MORI

The skeleton of a Japanese-American WWII internee was found by hikers close to California's second-highest peak. DNA tests identified the bones as those of Giichi Matsumura, an artist who had left Manzanar camp in August 1945 on a hiking trip with other internees, wishing to paint in the mountains, but had become lost in a freak snowstorm. *S.Telegraph, 5 Jan 2020.*



## BRUSHES WITH DEATH | Three different cases of dodging the Grim Reaper



### YOU LUCKY PRICKLE

Kai Scott escaped unhurt when a giant Saguaro cactus pierced his windshield in a crash on 10 July (pictured above). He hit the plant, breaking it in two, after veering across a central reservation near Tucson, Arizona. The Saguaro cactus can grow to be between 40-60ft (12-18m). Striking images show the black sports car impaled by the desert plant through the windshield. The thick, spined trunk can be seen sticking out over the bonnet. Other shots from the side show the near miss with the tree-like plant wedged between the front passenger seats. Scott, 39, appeared disoriented and sustained minor injuries. He was held on suspicion of driving while impaired and criminal damage. *Sun, 12 July 2019.*

### ACCIDENTAL EJECTION

A 64-year-old man accidentally released the ejector seat during a flight in a French fighter jet. The defence company executive was so agitated by the force of the take-off that he stood up and involuntarily grabbed hold of the ejection handle for support, thus ejecting himself while flying at over 500km/h (320mph). The man had never expressed a desire to fly a fighter jet and had no previous military aviation experience. But the flight in a two-seater Dassault Rafale B jet had been a gift from colleagues which he felt unable to refuse.

### The black sports car was impaled by a giant Saguaro cactus

An air accident investigation listed a string of errors leading up to the incident, including ignored medical warnings that the passenger, whose heart was racing at between 120 and 145 beats per minute beforehand, should not undergo the 3.7G of force generated by take-off. The investigators' report also criticised loose seat straps that allowed him to stand up upon take-off. He also lost his helmet while being ejected when the jet had reached a height of about 1,300ft (400m), seconds after departing Saint-Dizier air base in north-eastern France in March 2019. Fortunately, his parachute deployed and he had a soft landing in a nearby field, avoiding serious injury. *theguardian.com, 14 Apr 2020.*

### DEAD OR ALIVE

A Paraguayan woman miraculously sprang back to life in a body bag after being pronounced dead by doctors earlier that day. Gladys Rodríguez de Duarte (pictured at top right), who suffers from ovarian cancer, had been admitted to San Fernando



Clinic in Coronel Oviedo on the morning of Saturday 11 April after experiencing a severe spike in blood pressure, reports local newspaper *ABC Color*. A mere two hours later, her treating physician, Dr Heriberto Vera, mistakenly declared the 46-year-old woman dead of cervical cancer and handed a death certificate to her husband and daughter.

Undertakers transported what they presumed to be Duarte's cadaver to Duarte e Hijos funeral home, whereupon they noticed the body moving inside the bag. The "resurrected" patient was rushed to intensive care, where she is currently in "delicate but stable" condition.

Needless to say, Duarte's premature death declaration didn't sit well with her family. Her husband, Maximino Duarte Ferreira, has reportedly filed a complaint against the doctor, claiming that medics purposefully announced her passing because they no longer wanted to treat her. "He assumed she was dead and handed her naked to me like an animal with her death certificate," fumed Ferreira to local media. He claimed that "they disconnected her and passed her off to the funeral home" without even trying to revive her. However, doctors deny any foul play. "He tried to revive her, but it was unsuccessful," said fellow physician Dr Catalino Fabio, adding that Vera was unable to locate Duarte's pulse. She speculated that the patient might have suffered from catalepsy, a condition characterised by muscle rigidity and a complete lack of response to outside stimuli. *nypost.com, 23 Apr 2020.*

## COLOURS OUT OF SPACE

These 'rainbow pools' in Florida's Congaree National Park are seldom seen, as they only appear in snake-infested swamps at sunrise or sunset when the water is very still and in dry weather at certain times of the year. But the results can be spectacular, with pools of fluorescent, vibrant colour bubbling up to the surface. The viscous layers of reds, blues, pinks, yellows and purples sometimes span large areas of swamp, and are thought to be caused by decaying vegetation, especially cypress cones and needles, releasing their natural oils. Bacteria breaking down iron in the soil may also be a contributory factor. **PHOTO: NATIONAL PARK SERVICE.**





PAUL SIEVEKING examines the latest finds, including two ancient shields and a Viking gaming piece

## BLACK DEATH MONEY

Two coins dating from the Black Death – the 14th century bubonic plague pandemic that killed an estimated 200 million people – turned up during the Covid-19 lock-down. On 4 April, Dr Jamie Pringle found an Edward III silver halfgroat (twopenny piece) dating from 1352-53 while weeding his raspberry patch in Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire. Then on 22 May, David Lowe found another Edward III halfgroat from about the same date on his birthday while scanning a farmer's field near Rothbury, Northumberland, with his metal detector. *D.Mail*, 11 April; *Metro*, *D.Mirror*, 29 May 2020.

## PLAGUE HISTORY REVISED

A study published last December in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* explores the effects of the first recorded plague pandemic in and after AD 541, known as the Justinianic Plague. Traditionally, this has been regarded as a landmark event that led to significant demographic, economic and political changes in Late Antiquity – much as the Black Death devastated Europe in the 14th century. (The Emperor Justinian I himself caught the disease, but survived.)

“If this plague was a key moment in human history that killed between a third and half the population of the Mediterranean world in just a few years, as is often claimed, we should have evidence for it – but our survey of data sets found none,” said Lee Mordechai from the University of Maryland. An international team of historians looked at a diverse range of data to investigate the effects of the outbreak, including historical texts, coin circulation, burial practices, pollen samples, stone inscriptions, mortuary archaeology and plague genomes. They found that the number

of deaths caused by the outbreak may have been wildly overestimated and that it didn't play a significant role in the transformation of the Mediterranean world or in the decline of the Eastern Roman Empire.

Unlike during the Black Death, when the vast numbers of people killed by the plague resulted in mass graves, the team found no significant evidence that the numbers of graves containing more than one person increased. Similarly, the amount of cereal pollen – which can be found in lake or peat sediment and indicate the level of agricultural production – did not decrease as it had during the Black Death. Previous scholars had focused on the most evocative written accounts, applying them to other places in the Mediterranean world while ignoring hundreds of contemporary texts that didn't even mention the plague. However, Mordechai sounded a note of caution, pointing out the data-driven approach to history had limitations. “None of the data sets is perfect,” he said. “But at the moment they are the best thing we have. Future researchers could find different sources of data that disagree with our conclusions.” *[CNN]* 2 Dec 2019.

- The bones of a young Neolithic woman were found jumbled up with dozens of others in a limestone tomb in Sweden dating to about 3,900 BC. When DNA from two of her teeth was examined in 2017, scientists were astonished to find genetic sequences from *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium that causes plague. This was thought to have originated thousands of miles away in Asia, not reaching Europe until about 2900 BC; what was it doing in Sweden, a millennium earlier?

The answer, geneticist Nicolás Rascovan and his colleagues suggest, is that the plague actually originated in Europe. The bacteria

from the woman's teeth might be the earliest evidence of a continent-wide epidemic, one that explains a sudden and mysterious collapse in the European population. Rascovan looked at other people buried in the same tomb. Up to 78 people were buried around the same time, suggesting a surge in deaths that could have become an epidemic. Indeed, a young man in the tomb also had fragments of plague bacteria in his teeth. These are still early days for the study of ancient pathogens. Data points are so few and far between that it's like making sense of a photograph from just a handful of pixels. *theatlantic.com*, 6 Dec 2018.

## ANCIENT BRITISH SHIELDS

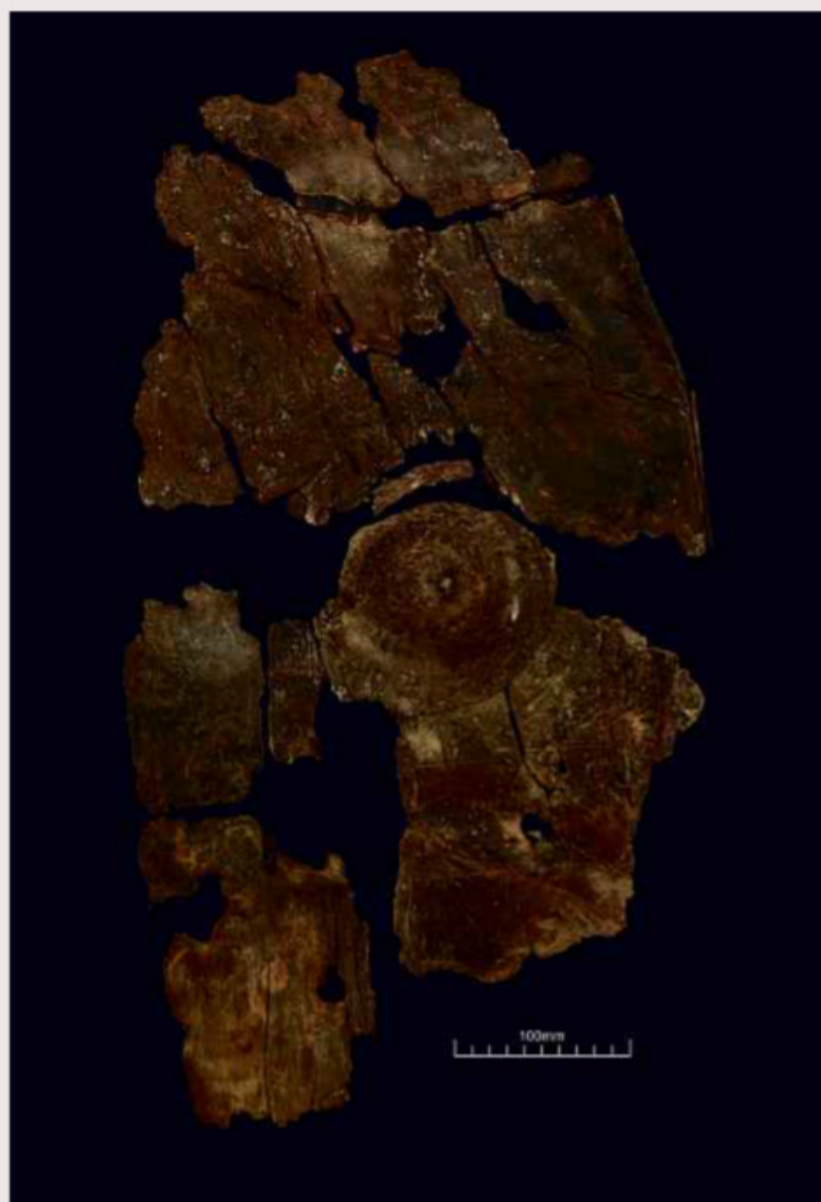
An ancient shield, made from tree bark between 395 and 250 BC, was discovered in Leicestershire in 2015, at a site close to the River Soar. It is the only example of its kind ever found in Europe and completely overturns assumptions about the weapons used in the Iron Age. Organic objects from the period very rarely survive, but the shield was preserved in waterlogged soil and may have been deposited in a water-filled pit. Bark shields of the period were entirely unknown in the northern hemisphere, and the assumption was that the material would have been too flimsy for use in war. However, experiments to remake the weapon in alder and willow showed the 3mm-thick shield, while much lighter than wood, would have been tough enough for battle, able to withstand attack by arrows, knives and axes.

It showed signs of having been painted red, and was made from green bark stiffened with internal wooden laths, described by lead archaeologist Matt Beamish as “like a whalebone corset of split hardwood”, and surrounded by a rim of hazel, with a twisted willow boss. The malleable green wood tightened as it dried, giving the shield its strength and forming the rounded rectangles into a slightly “waisted” shape, like a subtle figure of eight. This was exactly the shape of the celebrated ornate Battersea shield, which was dredged from the Thames in the mid-19th century and dates from the same period. The bark shield has been donated to the British Museum. *theguardian.com*, 23 May; *Times*, 24 May 2019.

- An Iron Age warrior's tomb, unearthed in Pocklington, East Yorkshire, in 2018, had a chariot with two upright horses positioned as if they were leaping from the ground. The horse skeletons were headless and may have been decapitated by historical ploughing. There was a highly decorated brooch and the remains of six pigs, thought to be a food offering. The warrior was in his late 40s



ABOVE: This tomb in Sweden provided evidence of plague in Europe a millennium earlier than previously thought.



**ABOVE LEFT:** The Iron Age Pocklington shield, hailed as the most important British Celtic art object of the millennium. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The ancient wooden shield unearthed in Leicestershire. **BELOW:** A tiny gaming piece of blue and white glass that was probably used in the Viking board game *hnefatafl*, a forerunner of chess.

and died between 320 and 174 BC. He was crouched in the chariot on top of a magnificent 30in (76cm) bronze shield, which has now been restored and hailed as the most important British Celtic art object of the millennium. In the La Tene style, it has a central raised boss and highly unusual scalloped border. Damage typical of a sword slash and signs of repair show it was not merely ceremonial. *D.Mail*, 6 Dec 2019. Another chariot burial was found nearby in 2017 [FT361:18].

### VIKING GAMING PIECE

Excavations on Lindisfarne (Holy Island), off the Northumberland coast, have unearthed a tiny gaming piece made from swirling blue and white glass, topped with small white beads. It is probably from the Viking board game *hnefatafl* – or King's Table – a forerunner of chess, in which players try to capture the opposing king. Although it could have been dropped by a marauding Norse raider, archaeologists think it might have been owned by a high-status islander. It was found in a trench dated to the eighth or ninth century AD, around the time of the Viking invasion. The monastery of Lindisfarne was founded around 634 by Irish monk Saint Aidan, acting under the orders of King Oswald, but it was only after



the death of Bishop Cuthbert in 687 that the community began to grow in prosperity. When his tomb was opened 11 years after his death, his body was found incorrupt and he was named a saint. *D.Telegraph*, 7 Feb 2020.

### VIKING TOMB

When Mariann Kristiansen and her husband tore up the floor of their house in northern Norway to set down a layer of insulation, they discovered a Viking grave. It had lain undiscovered beneath the house in Bodo, just inside the Arctic Circle, since Ms Kristiansen's great-grandfather built it in

1914, separated only by topsoil and rocks, which may once have been a cairn. An iron axe head and detailed ornament found in the grave have been provisionally dated to between AD 950 and 1050, towards the end of the Viking period, around the time of King Canute. *thetimes.co.uk*, 27 May 2020.

### ANCIENT ERROR

Scholars from Utrecht University in the Netherlands claim that one of the most famous buildings of Antiquity has been misnamed for two millennia. The term *Parthenon* – popularised in the Roman period – originally belonged to an ancient Greek treasury that contained offerings to the goddess Athena and is now called the *Erechtheion*, situated about 100 yards from the main temple on the Acropolis that we have all been calling the Parthenon. This should be known by its original Greek name, *Hekatompedon*, meaning “the 100ft temple”, mentioned in archives dating back 2,500 years. A more user-friendly name would be “The great temple of Athena”. Parthenon means “house of virgins” and the smaller temple is indeed decorated with caryatids – sculpted female figures that act as pillars, holding up the roof. *American Journal of Archaeology*, Dec; *D.Telegraph*, 18 Dec 2019.

## BIZARRE CRIME

Strange days in the courts, with sex roleplayers at the wrong address, a porn star's ritual gone fatally awry and a plot to hex a synagogue

### SEX FANTASY FAIL

A bungled sex fantasy saw two Sydney men armed with machetes enter the wrong house in rural New South Wales. A client had hired the pair to carry out his fantasy of being tied up and having a broom handle rubbed around his underwear, making arrangements via Facebook and giving the men his address. He was offering A\$5,000 (£2,700) if the roleplay was "really good". Unfortunately, the man later moved to another address 50km (30 miles) away but neglected to update the two men, who then entered a home at the original address.

The resident noticed a light on in his kitchen at 6.15. "Bugger off, it's too early," he yelled, assuming it was a friend of his who came by each morning to make coffee. When the hired men called out their client's name, the resident turned on a bedroom light and removed a sleep apnoea mask he had been wearing. He then saw the pair standing above his bed with the machetes, which they appeared to have brought as props for the role play.

Realising their mistake, one of the two men said, "Sorry, mate," and shook the resident's hand. The other said "Bye" before they drove off, after which the resident contacted the police.

The pair then drove to the correct address, but upon seeing one of the men had a "great big knife" in his trousers, their client asked them to leave the weapons in their car. They then had coffee while the client made bacon, eggs and noodles before one of the pair, Terrence Leroy, fell asleep on the couch. By this time, the police had arrived at the property and, after finding the machetes in their car, arrested the hired men.

They were both charged with entering a home armed with a weapon. At trial, Leroy was acquitted. "It was a commercial agreement to tie up and stroke a semi-naked man in his underpants with a broom," his lawyer argued. "Entry was not with intent to intimidate."



ABOVE: A Colorado River toad, whose hallucinogenic venom was fatally ingested by photographer Jose Luis Abad at the home of Spanish porn star Nacho Vidal (below).

The judge, Sean Grant, conceded that "the facts of the case are unusual" and agreed that the evidence did not suggest their actions had been intentional. "They carried the machetes either as a prop or something to use in that fantasy," he said. "The fantasy was unscripted and there was discretion as to how it would be carried out." *theguardian.com*, 28 May; *BBC News*, 29 May 2020.

### PORN STAR TOAD DEATH

A Spanish porn star, 46-year-old Nacho Vidal, was detained by police on suspicion of manslaughter after a man died at his Valencia home during a "mystical ritual" involving toad venom. Spanish police, who also detained two other men, said the victim, photographer Jose Luis Abad, had died after inhaling the toxin produced by *bufo alvarius*, an endangered North American toad, which it secretes from its glands. The Sonoran Desert toad, also known as the Colorado River toad, found in Mexico and the southwestern USA, employs the powerful toxin to defend itself against predators. The substance, a psychedelic belonging to the tryptamine family, is a natural form of 5-MeO-DMT, similar to but more potent than DMT, popularised by psychedelic pioneer Terence McKenna. Both are found in several plant species as well as at least one toad.

DMT, known for the intense but short-lasting psychedelic



state it induces, is sometimes called the 'spirit molecule'. Some users report encounters with 'machine elves', apparent engineers and construction workers working behind the scenes to maintain our Universe. 5-MeO-DMT, four to six times stronger than DMT, reportedly induces far fewer visual effects than the latter. Instead, 5-MeO-DMT is known for its "intense perspective shifts and sensory overload" and is known as the 'God Molecule'. The difference has been described by some as "being confronted by God versus being submerged in the void, or even what it would feel like to become a single-celled organism". A 2019 study suggested it may have therapeutic uses, such as easing anxiety and depression, while acknowledging a currently

limited understanding of its effects on humans.

Mr Vidal, who has featured in hundreds of pornographic movies, has promoted use of the toad's venom online, including YouTube videos, but his lawyer, Daniel Salvador, denied suggestions that his client had acted as a shaman during the ritual, and said Mr Vidal was "very upset by the death of this person". Arguing that photographer Jose Luis Abad had "previously tried that substance and wanted to try it again" in a "comfortable" environment, Mr Salvador stated that his client believes himself to be innocent, maintains that the consumption of the venom was entirely voluntary, and that the man's death had been nothing more than a tragic accident. *quora.com*, 12 Aug 2019; *BBC News*, 4 June 2020.

### EX-KLANSMAN AND 'MEXICAN HITLER'

A Colorado man has been charged with domestic terrorism over an alleged plot to blow up a Jewish synagogue in Pueblo, Colorado. 27-year-old Richard Holzer was arrested in possession of explosives after he met with an undercover agent at a motel on the night of Friday 1 November 2019. According to an affidavit filed the following day, Holzer had planned to use the explosives on a synagogue.

"Holzer stated that he did not think anyone would be there, but that if they were, Holzer would not care because they would be Jews," the complaint said.

In addition to explosives, Holzer was said to have paid a man called 'Mexican Hitler' to "hex and poison a local synagogue". Holzer reportedly stated that he put arsenic in the water pipes of the synagogue on 31 October. The affidavit said that the suspect was preparing for an upcoming racial war. Holzer is facing domestic terrorism charges of attempting to obstruct a religious service with explosives or fire. *rawstory.com*, 4 Nov 2019.

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# A hundred harvests left?

DAVID HAMBLING wonders where a very specific prediction of agricultural Armageddon came from

Scientists warned about the potential for a global pandemic for decades, even suggesting the likely source would be a Chinese food market. But governments did little to prepare, and we have seen the consequences. Now another type of disaster looms, an agricultural Armageddon, with headlines warning of catastrophic declines in the UK's soil fertility.

A typical headline indicates "we only have a hundred harvests left". Some, like the *Guardian* newspaper in 2018, upped the ante and suggested that there were only 60 harvests left. Michael Gove, then environment secretary, warned in 2017 that we were down to our last 30 to 40 harvests.

"We have encouraged a type of farming which has damaged the Earth," Gove told the Sustainable Soils Alliance. "Countries can withstand coups d'état, wars and conflict, even leaving the EU, but no country can withstand the loss of its soil and fertility."

Myth and superstition have always surrounded crops and fertility, from the annual sacrifices of the ancient Egyptians to the wasteland surrounding the cursed Fisher King. While blood sacrifices to ensure a good harvest may be a thing of the past – Wicker Man notwithstanding – it still evokes primal emotions. Even the humble allotment has attracted its own body of folklore [see **FT392:52-5**].

There is an innate suspicion of any new farming practices, invariably seen as 'unnatural'. Such suspicion may be justified; the over-use of pesticides in the 1950s and 1960s caused environmental damage that persists today. However, this fear now tends to be overplayed, and has been successfully monetised by suppliers who can slap an 'organic' label on foodstuffs and charge a premium.

The organic movement has taken on a mystical dimension. This is made explicit in 'biodynamic agriculture', in which soil fertility is part of a spiritual whole in which humanity participates. This turns farming into a moral practice where we are punished for any sins against nature.

The threat to our topsoil, though, is less about mystical forces and more about soil compaction and failing to return carbon to the ground in the form of organic matter. One issue, identified by Richard Allison in *Farmer's Weekly* in 2014, was the shift in mechanisation in the 1990s when machinery was supersized with the advent of 'super tractors' and 'super combines' bigger than anything previous seen in this country. These machines spread their weight with flotation tyres, allowing them



## The threat to our topsoil is less about mystical forces and more about soil compaction

to go on softer ground than was previously possible. Unlike other tyres, these 'big boots' can cause deeper soil damage that may not be noticed.

Such heavy equipment causes compaction and loss of soil productivity. Elsewhere, stubble burning, to make next season's ploughing easier, deprives the land of organic matter. But finding the source of the '100 harvests left' claim is not easy. Newspaper stories and articles from pressure groups tend to quote each other; scientific research data is relatively scant.

One paper quoted repeatedly is one from the University of Sheffield in 2014 entitled "Urban cultivation in allotments maintains soil qualities adversely affected by conventional agriculture." This was a direct comparison between allotments cultivated by hand and fields subjected to the full panoply of modern farming methods.

Researchers took soil samples from 27 sites: allotments, parks, gardens, and agricultural land around Sheffield. Their principal finding was that the allotment soil was healthier than that from the arable farmland. The allotment soil had more organic carbon, more nitrogen, a better carbon to nitrogen ratio, and, of course, was less compacted. This is explained by researchers finding that three-quarters of allotment holders added manure, and 95 per cent added organic compost, as well as commercial fertilisers and composts.

The study's main conclusion was

that small-scale urban food production is good for the soil and "policy making should promote more urban own-growing in preference to further intensification of conventional agriculture to meet increasing food demand."

None of this is very surprising. Boutique cultivation without heavy machinery or intensive use of chemicals, and the time-proven method of digging compost into the ground year after year, produce good quality soil. And urban dwellers can efficiently meet some of their food needs: the allotment movement was set up in the early 20th century for the very purpose of allowing the labouring poor to grow vegetables. Growing your own gained a huge boost in the WWII 'Dig for Victory' campaign; by the war's end 1.4 million allotments were growing 1.3 million tons of produce annually.

But where does the 'only 100 harvests left' claim come in? It is not in the Sheffield report, nor is there any reference to 60 or 30 harvests, or even figures suggesting a rate of soil degradation from which this could be calculated. While the Sheffield team campaigned energetically for soil quality, they have not made any claims about how many harvests we have left. In any case, theirs was a strictly local study, which could not simply be extrapolated to the rest of a large and diverse country.

Globally, the problems with topsoil erosion are well known, especially in areas with massive deforestation, and areas in danger of desertification where the topsoil can literally dry up and blow away. When Professor John Crawford of the University of Sydney talked to *Time* magazine in 2012, he spoke of a 'rough calculation' that there were 60 harvests left worldwide. However, in the eight years since then, world food production has been continuing to trend upwards rather than down.

In the UK, the Sustainable Soils Alliance, a group combining farmers, scientists and business, believes that it will be possible to restore topsoil in the UK in a generation with the right farming practices. They point to the improvements achieved in air and water quality in recent decades to show how things can change.

The thrill of obliteration at the hands of vengeful nature outraged by our ecological sins makes good headlines. The long, slow process of gathering data, of changing government agricultural policy, of the introduction of new evidence-based guidelines for farming is less newsworthy. But perhaps we would all now settle for a little less apocalypse and a little more scientifically guided progress.



# SPACE NEWS

The latest stories from our Solar System and possibly beyond, including America's plans for lunar imperialism and genetically enhanced astronauts

## SECRET SPACE PLANE

The US Air Force successfully launched its Atlas V rocket from Cape Canaveral in May, carrying an X-37B space plane. During this sixth mission, the plane will deploy a satellite into orbit and also test power-beaming technology, but the purpose of previous missions has not been revealed by the Pentagon.

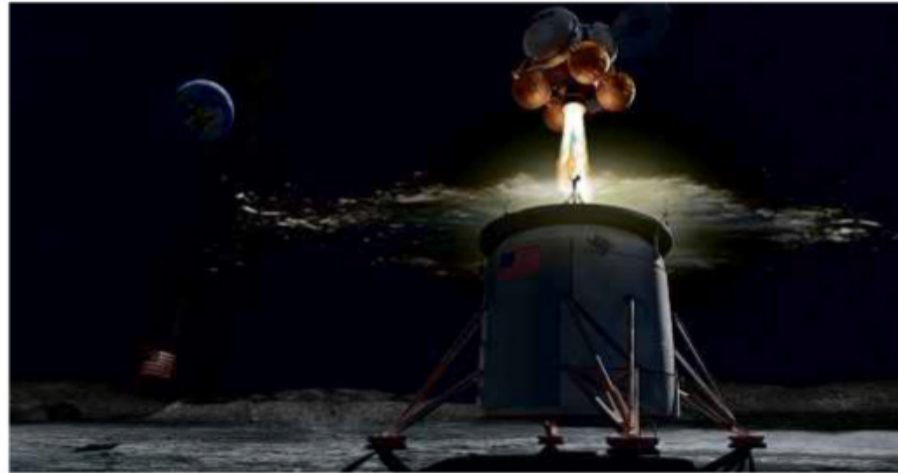
X-37B is a classified programme that began in 1999. The programme has two vehicles, each resembling a smaller version of the crewed space shuttles retired in 2011. The plane, built by Boeing, can glide back down through the atmosphere to land on a runway, just as the shuttle did. When in orbit, it uses solar panels for power, measures over 29ft (9m) long, has a wingspan of nearly 15ft (4m) and a weight of 11,000lb (5,000kg). The first plane flew in April 2010, returning after an eight-month mission. The most recent mission ended in October 2019 after 780 days in orbit. In total, the programme has spent over seven years in space.

United Launch Alliance, who operate the Atlas rocket, were required to end their webcast earlier in the flight than usual, which naturally sparked much debate and speculation. Air Force Secretary Barbara Barrett had earlier announced "This X-37B mission will host more experiments than any other prior mission." One of the known onboard experiments will test the effect of radiation on seeds. The latest mission's duration is unknown, as are its objectives. *BBC News, 17 May 2020.*

## US MOON INVASION

President Trump's plans for NASA's Artemis lunar project have been met with anger by Russia, who have been excluded from the Artemis Accords, the legal blueprint for lunar mining currently being drafted by Washington. It could include Canada, Japan, some European countries and the UAE – but not Russia, who successfully collaborated with the USA on the International Space Station.

"The principle of the invasion



ABOVE: America returns to the Moon in an artist's impression of Artemis.

is the same, be it the Moon or Iraq," said Dmitry Rogozin, head of Roscosmos, Russia's space agency. "Create a coalition of the willing and then, without the UN or even NATO, move forward to the goal. But this will only result in a new Afghanistan or Iraq... There have... been examples in history when one country decided to start seizing territories in its own interests and everyone remembers how that turned out."

NASA is allocating tens of billions of dollars to the project, aiming to establish "sustainable exploration" of the Moon by 2028, with commercial companies mining lunar rocks and water to be converted into rocket fuel. It plans to use the Moon as a base for an eventual manned mission to Mars and beyond.

Russia's exclusion from the project followed the newly established US Space Force's announcement that Russian satellites have been tracking US spy satellites in an "unusual and disturbing" way, which could "create a dangerous situation in space," according to Space Force head General John Raymond. *theguardian.com, 30 Apr; Times, 11 May 2020.*

## ENHANCED ASTRONAUTS

NASA's plans for manned flights to Mars in the 2030s are intended to be the precursor to permanent settlements on the Red Planet. But colonists will face several challenges, including high radiation loads and bone-wasting microgravity. Kennda Lynch, an astrobiologist and geomicrobiologist at Houston's Lunar and Planetary Institute,

has suggested that genetic engineering and other advanced technologies "might be critical" in order for settlers to live, work and establish families on Mars.

A webinar held at the New York Academy of Sciences called 'Alienating Mars: Challenges of Space Colonization' discussed genetic enhancement. Geneticist Christopher Mason of Cornell University's medical school presented a study in which genes from tardigrades, tiny but tough animals that can survive the vacuum of space, had been inserted into human cells. The engineered cells displayed greater resistance to radiation than their normal counterparts. Tardigrades and 'extremophile' microbes, such as the radiation-resistant bacterium *Deinococcus radiodurans*, "are a great, basically natural reservoir of amazing traits and talents in biology," added Mason. He has been studying the effects of long-term spaceflight on NASA astronaut Scott Kelly, who spent nearly a year on board the ISS in 2015 and 2016.

Such genetic enhancement might someday allow astronauts to travel further than Mars. Jupiter's moon Europa is both extremely cold and situated in the centre of Jupiter's powerful radiation belts, which at present would be lethal. Europa is thought to be one of the Solar System's best bets to harbour alien life. NASA plans to launch an unmanned mission named Europa Clipper in the 2020s, which will assess the moon's habitability, and to develop a robotic Europa lander.

Recent advances in synthetic biology may help colonists establish a foothold on Mars. "These are some of the things that we can actually do to help us make things we need, help us make materials to build our habitats," said Lynch. Some researchers have suggested designer microbes be used to terraform Mars into a world habitable for humans.

However, others have cautioned that such an approach raises ethical questions, since in its ancient past Mars might once have hosted life, and may still do so today, in subsurface lakes or aquifers. Most astrobiologists advise against terraforming Mars, on the grounds that it would be undesirable to eradicate or alter a native ecosystem. This would be both unethical and unscientific, argued Kennda Lynch, noting that one of the main reasons for exploring Mars is to determine if Earth is the only world to host life. "And how can we do that," she added, "if we go and change the planet before we go and find out if life actually was living there?" *NBC News, 19 May 2020.*

## INVISIBLE ALIENS

Dr Helen Sharman, the first British astronaut in space, insists that extraterrestrials not only exist, but may be living among us. "There are so many billions of stars out there that there must be all sorts of forms of life," said the chemist, now 56, who in 1991 spent eight days at the Mir space station; she warned that aliens may be so different from us that we wouldn't recognise them. "Will they be like you and me, made up of carbon and nitrogen? Maybe not. It's possible they're here right now and we can't see them," she said. (We are reminded of Trevor J Constable's 'bioforms', living creatures akin to bacteria that he claimed lived in the Earth's atmosphere, see **FT341:24-25**; and the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy's* mighty alien battle fleet that crossed the void of space to conquer Earth but was promptly swallowed by a small dog.) *D.Express, D.Mirror, Star, Sun, 6 Jan 2020.*

NASA



# Donald J West remembered

ALAN MURDIE on the distinguished academic who was also a tester of mediums and ghost hunter

Of him in psychical research it could be said, as of King Priam in *The Iliad*, “Two generations he had seen rise and fall, and of the third he was a ruler”.

Professor Donald J West died last February at the age of 95 (obit **FT393:31**). This column is offered as a personal tribute, one directed at rectifying what I considered to be notable omissions from the many obituaries appearing hitherto.

These variously recalled his life and career as a medical doctor, psychiatrist, distinguished Cambridge academic and pioneering criminologist. Perhaps inevitably, with sections of the media being more interested in sex and sexual politics than psychical research, *The Guardian* and the BBC focused principally upon the impact of West’s landmark study *Homosexuality* (1954) in helping achieve the legalisation of homosexuality in England, and the subsequent ideological backlash the book attracted from some newly liberated radicals after 1970. Respectful acknowledgement was also made of his internationally renowned criminological studies, relegating his labours in psychical research to a poor third.

Almost entirely omitted, even from obituaries recognising his contributions in paranormal research, was proper mention of Donald West, the arch-tester of mediums and hunter of ghosts. So, redressing this perceived omission, I offer the following.

West spanned the old style of psychical research, rooted in the Victorian age, connecting it with the techniques of laboratory-based parapsychology that prevail today. Joining the Society for Psychical Research in 1941, and remaining a member until his death 79 years later, he served three terms as its President. When he joined he met and talked with colleagues and confidantes of the founders of the Society in 1882, such as Frederic Myers (1843-1901) and Edmund Gurney (1847-1888). Then, impressed by the new statistical approach of JB Rhine to psi powers tests in the USA in the 1930s and 1940s, West urged the adoption of the



LEFT: Donald J West photographed in the 1940s

His first investigations began as a teenager in the dark séances of wartime Spiritualist circles. He gained admission to one séance by volunteering to help clear up the rubble outside a local Spiritualist church following an air raid. At the sittings, spirits were said to touch the hands of sitters. He recalled how “I foolishly wet my own with red ink to reveal the tell-tale red on the medium’s hands when the light was turned on... The outcome was disastrous. Angrily banished, the séances continued, but my investigation ended” (recollected in 2016).

An early convergence with his professional interests occurred in 1944, attending the Old Bailey trial of medium Helen Duncan. West was probably the last survivor of all those who sat through the infamous proceedings launched under the Witchcraft Act 1735 against the large and hysterical Scottish woman who swore she materialised the dead for a fee (see **FT116:40-43, 372:38**).

It was her summoning of the dead to rooms above a chemist’s shop in Portsmouth that resulted in the indictment. Bereaved and desperate relatives of missing service personnel flocked to her ‘temple’ where she materialised phantoms, along with spectral parrots and cats. Plain-clothes police infiltrated one séance on 14 January 1944 and rapidly convinced themselves it was all chicanery. On 19 January 1944 the police returned to arrest her and her ghostly guide ‘Albert’ as he materialised. One officer tried snatching what he took to be a white sheet used in faking ectoplasm but failed to catch it. He and other officers then arrested the medium and her accomplices. Prosecutors escalated the usual Vagrancy Act 1824 charge (see **FT393:19**) to an indictment under the Witchcraft Act, the first for two centuries.

At trial, Helen Duncan and the others were defended by Spiritualist barrister Charles Loseby, who sought to prove her powers genuine by calling numerous

## In October 1947 West participated in the first “official investigation” into a haunted house

same in Britain. His work and surveys of psi experiences have been quoted in almost every serious book on parapsychology in the last 70 years. His activities continued until the final year of his life; his last published work emerged in 2018.

Yet his enthusiasm for ghost hunting and the rigorous testing of mediums was less well-known and not always welcome, his view being that research devoted into “premonitory dreams and visions, death wraiths, hauntings and the like” was “in many ways the most instructive and certainly the most exciting”. (DJ West, ‘The Investigation of Spontaneous Cases’ in *Proceedings* of the SPR v.48, 1946-49, pp.263-305)

witnesses who vouched for her. Hearing the testimony mustered in her defence, West commented: “This evidence is extraordinary. Granting its veracity, either the witness must have been hallucinated and deluded to an astonishing degree or else the phenomena were genuine.”

The jury was unconvinced by them. After the judge declined her offer to produce ectoplasm before the court, she was found guilty and sentenced to nine months imprisonment. An appeal followed, Loseby vainly presenting a technical argument on the precise scope of section 4 of the Witchcraft Act 1735. He cited a bevy of archaic statutes, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century authorities such as Dalton’s *Country Justice* (1635) all showing the law was aimed at suppressing ‘Conjurers [who]... have personal conference with the devil, or evil spirit.’ Loseby insisted modern Spiritualism was in no sense evil or involve invoking malign entities and therefore not a ‘conjunction’ prohibited by the Act.

It is possible to sympathise with this technical argument in several respects. The Act of 1735 long predated the arrival of Spiritualism in 1848, and therefore Spiritualism would not have been in the contemplation of legislators when the law was drafted (generally a law is meant to be given the meaning it had on the day it was passed). Furthermore, to any reasonable and balanced modern adult mind, photographs of Duncan’s materialised spirits show forms that hardly convey a sense of evil. Descriptions such as ‘laughable’, ‘ridiculous’, ‘preposterous’, ‘pathetic’, ‘Michael Jackson’s *Spitting Image* puppet left out in the rain’ etc may all fall readily from one’s lips, but scarcely ‘evil’.

Loseby doubtless had a moral point, but

it was a court of criminal law. The antique Act had been enacted for the “more effectual preventing and punishing [of] any pretences to such arts or powers... whereby ignorant persons are frequently deluded and defrauded”. It mattered not whether spirits existed, good, evil or otherwise, if the jury hearing the evidence were satisfied of fraud at the Portsmouth séances. Content the jury’s verdict was sound in law and that Duncan was a social pest, the Appeal Court declined to interfere (*R v Duncan* (1944) 1 KB 713; the ‘Trial of Mrs Helen Duncan’ *Proceedings* 48, 1946-49, 32-64).

To explore how such grotesque tricks duped observers, West valiantly spent many hours at séances, concluding emotionally primed sitters were susceptible to hallucinations in darkness. Hopes that the deployment of infra-red photography in séance rooms would settle controversies were disappointed, their use only seeming to quash the manifestation of the most dramatic effects altogether.

Mediumship merged with ghost hunting when in October 1947 West participated in what was labelled the first “official investigation into a haunted house”. This concerned ‘Woodfield’ an old property at Woburn Sands, Bedfordshire. Its owner, Mr Key, appealed against the rates demand on his property to the Luton Assessment Committee for Luton Council, claiming ghosts (including Dick Turpin who supposedly used the property as a safehouse) affected its value. Local stories alleged bodies were once concealed inside the walls. Little contemporary recent evidence for a haunting was provided, save from a lady who awoke one night and witnessed hands and arms poking out from the wall above her head. She fell

asleep, but on awakening later, her eerie vision of thrusting hands recurred. These experiences ceased after she switched bedrooms.

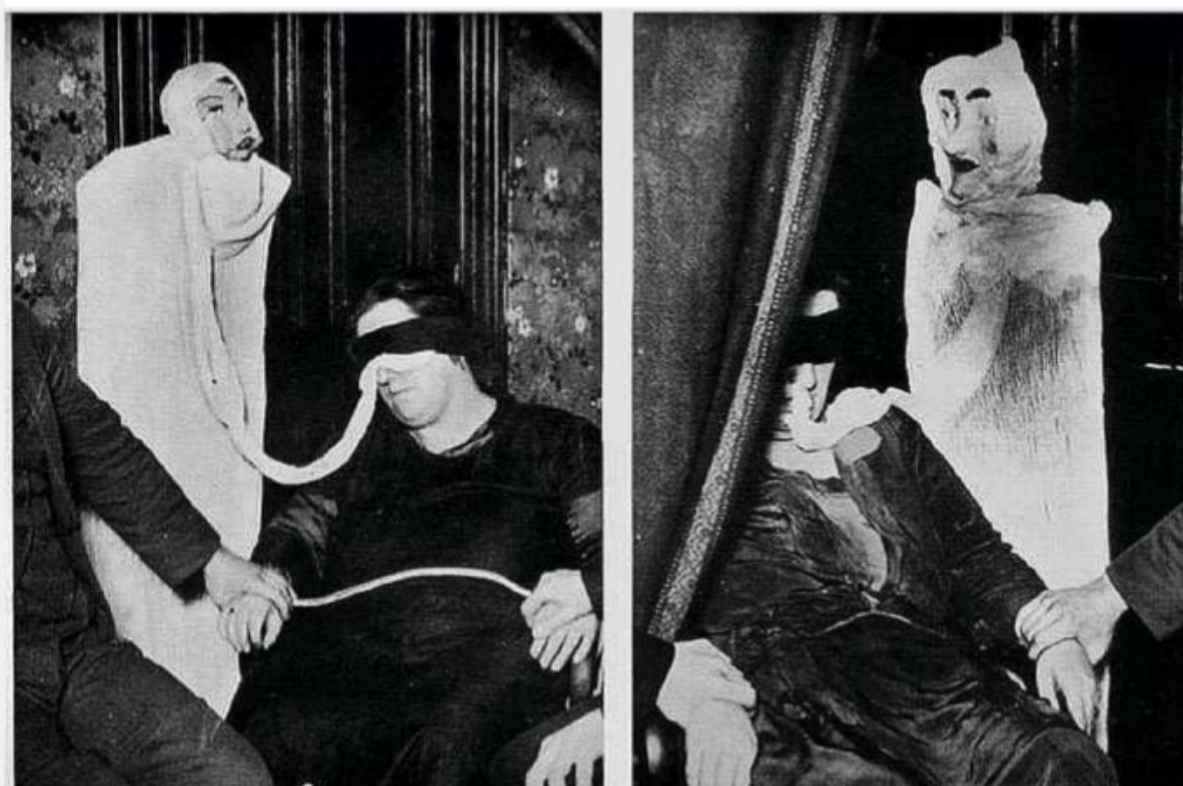
Local Councillor HWM Richards convened two nocturnal ghost hunts inside the house, duly attended by psychic researchers, members of the Luton Assessment Committee and two mediums, one male and one female. On 11 October, a séance was convened; one medium sensed an old man and a black horse – presumably Turpin’s famous Black Bess! Various Spiritualists present also reported strange sensations, though seemingly with no correlation between them.

Neither Donald West nor ghost hunter Peter Underwood considered these results impressive – unable to exclude suggestion, cold reading or unconscious recall. The Assessment Committee remained similarly sceptical and declined any rates reduction. West found it interesting “how ready some people are to assume without evidence a supernatural explanation, and how unwilling others are even to consider such a possibility. The objective standpoint of the psychical investigator seems foreign to the average individual.” (*Journal of the SPR*, Dec 1947).

His critical eye was also falling upon some of the classic apparitional encounters recorded in the Society’s collection *Phantasms of the Living* (1886). These involved an apparition of a recognised person appearing at the moment of death. He coined the condensed term ‘crisis apparition’ for a lecture in June 1945 – it has since become the standard term – and doubted whether a watertight case, not potentially open to explanation by coincidence or a dream, could be obtained.

Post-War Britain generated many curious ghost stories, enough to keep him employed part-time as SPR Research Officer. In 1948 West received a strange letter from a lady in Brighton complaining of what today would be classified as Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP). She was troubled by mild poltergeist activity and hearing strange voices muttering down a telephone line. Unfortunately, verification was not possible (see *Haunted Brighton*, 2006, by Alan Murdie).

In 1948 West engaged the social surveying organisation Mass Observation to sample hallucinations among the populace, the largest since the *Census of Hallucinations* (1890) conducted by the SPR. The aim was discovering the features of contemporary apparitions. From the results reported, 40% of apparitions were of living people, 29% of persons considered deceased, while the majority went unrecognised. Between 1-2% were viewed as angels by percipients. Patterns



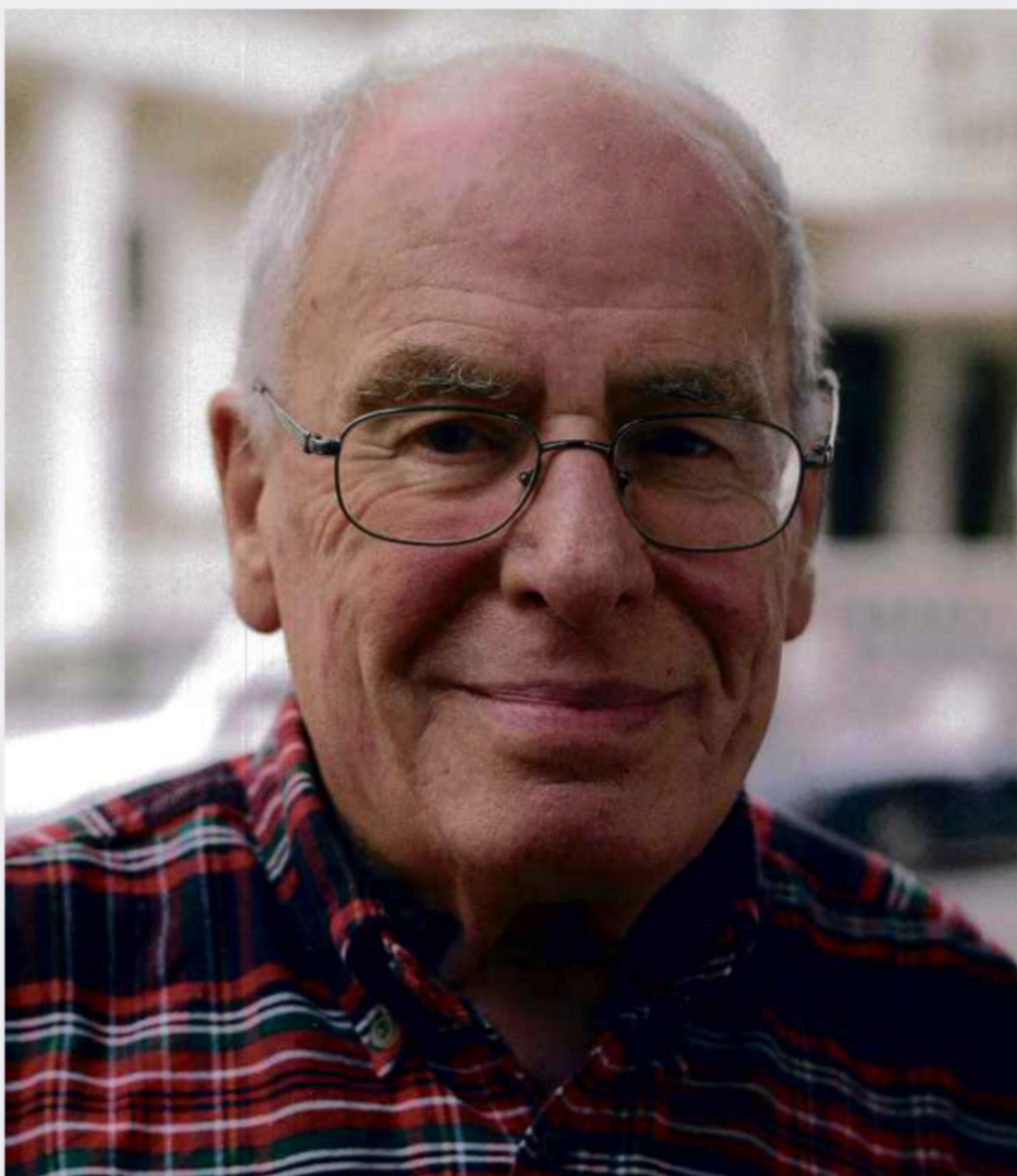
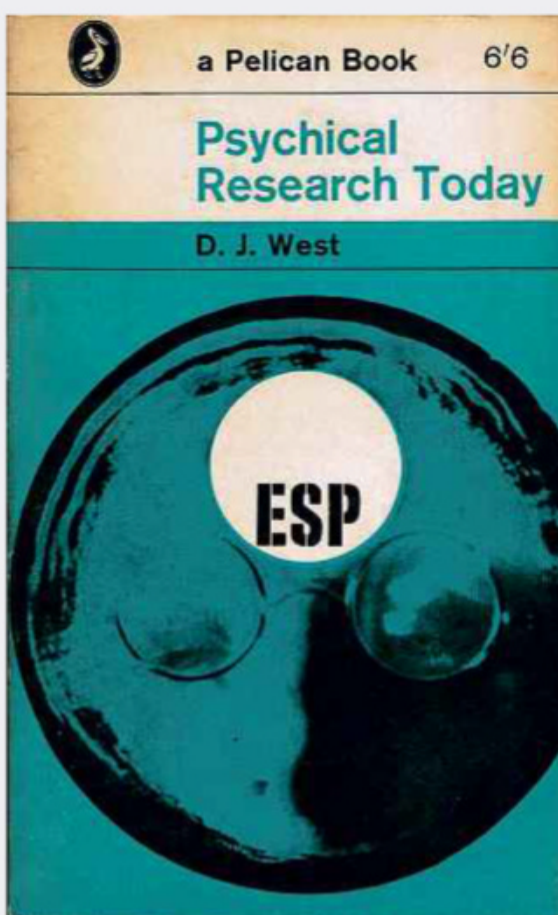
ABOVE: Helen Duncan materialising ectoplasmic spirit forms – was this evil or simply ridiculous?



# GHOSTWATCH

broadly matched the 1890 findings, West concluding (with the exception of crisis cases) that “there has been no diminution in the frequency, and no substantial change in the character of sporadic hallucinations since the census of 58 years ago.”

Medical and psychiatric expertise solved other cases. In February 1949 West began investigating the curious ‘Woman in Brown’, one of several ghosts reported stalking an office block and shops in east London by mostly female staff. The neighbourhood had been heavily bombed during the War leaving many casualties. The building itself was struck by a V1 rocket in 1944 and practically rebuilt in 1948. Probing the psychological history of one witness (given the pseudonym of ‘Miss Benson’), West identified a fantasy-prone personality and impressionable individual suffering disproportionately from a mild trauma caused through merely being told details of deaths and injuries in the area. This shock triggered “profound and prolonged



**TOP:** West frequently clashed with other members of the SPR over their Spiritualist interpretations of phenomena. His 1954 book set out his own conclusions. **ABOVE:** Professor West in later years.

reactions” that influenced the others. Thus, the world was spared the emergence of the ‘Woman in Brown’ as a bona fide apparition, leaving the way clear for Susan Hill’s imaginings over 30 years later. (‘The Woman in Brown an investigation of an apparition’ by Edward Osborn JSPR vol. XXXV, no.655, Nov-Dec 1949).

West’s dual interests in crime and mediumship converged again when he revisited the legend of RJ Lees (1849-1931), the medium who allegedly identified ‘Jack the Ripper’. On 10 November 1948 (coinciding almost exactly with the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the last murder) West interviewed Lees’s daughter, Miss Eva Lees. She said her father foresaw two Ripper murders, informing Scotland Yard before they took place. West noted her stories resembled vintage rumours that a ‘Doctor Stanley’, when dying in Buenos Aires, confessed to being the Ripper, acting from revenge for the venereal infection of his son by a prostitute. She further averred her father served as a medium for Queen Victoria, channelling the spirit of Prince Albert, with Lees receiving a pension from the Privy Purse in reward. Unfortunately, diligent searching of official records failed to substantiate these stories, West concluding: “The claim that the medium Lees helped to trace ‘Jack the Ripper’ is not supported by the known facts. Scotland Yard denies all knowledge of the medium, and no one can be found to fit the description of the mad doctor who was supposed to have disappeared.”

His challenges to a Spiritualist interpretation led to clashes within the SPR. Surprisingly, one who was not pleased was GNM Tyrrell, responsible for the most detailed theory for apparitions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (See his *Apparitions* 1938, 1942). In 2012 I asked Donald for his recollections of Tyrrell. He told me, “I found him a strangely superstitious man” but admitted: “I might well say that because he sacked me as Research Officer!”.

West duly brought out his own book with his conclusions in *Psychical Research Today* (1954). He endorsed telepathy, clairvoyance and psychokinesis, but felt the evidence was inadequate for spirit contact, hauntings and dowsing. On poltergeists he maintained one had to go back to 1878 and Professor William Barrett’s encounter with a rapping poltergeist in Ireland for a case that met his exacting standards.

West helped organise the Society’s Conference on Spontaneous Phenomena, held at Newnham College over 11-16 July 1955, drawing delegates from the UK, the USA, Denmark, France, Haiti, Italy, Holland and Norway. Two years later he published *Eleven Lourdes Miracles* (1957), pointing



**LEFT:** Professor William Barrett, whose poltergeist encounter was one of the few that met West's standards. **BELOW:** GNM Tyrrell, who once sacked West from an SPR position.



out that if miraculous cures involved, for instance, the regeneration of a lost limb, research would be home and dry in evidential terms; alas, no such verified cases arose in modern times.

Thereafter, with an increasingly busy life in criminology, West concentrated largely upon laboratory testing and helping achieve an academic foothold for psychical research at university level. From time to time he advised ghost hunters, assisting with psychological assessments of witnesses living in haunted houses.

Returning to spontaneous case research in the 1980s, he was instrumental in launching another nationwide survey. This was published as *A Pilot Census of Hallucinations*, crystallising results gathered by 410 volunteer collectors, recruited from SPR members and through an advertisement in *The Psychologist*. Recording the address, sex and occupation of informants, essentially the same question as put in 1948 was asked: "Have you ever (when fully awake and unaffected by illness, drink or drugs) had a vivid experience of seeing something or someone, or of hearing a voice, when there was nothing there and no ordinary cause for it that you could find?". The survey found many people had, with West concluding, "It would appear that apparitions, or 'waking hallucinations', are as prevalent today as they have ever been." (*A Pilot Census of Hallucinations* (1990) *Proceedings of the SPR*, vol.57, part 215).

By this time, West had also altered his views on poltergeists, following the investigation by Tony Cornell and Alan Gauld at Hannath Hall, Cambridgeshire, in 1957 – and others across the UK, Germany and

North America. Scientific work emerging with mediums also drew his attention, though he was not always positive about it. While accepting mediums provided the best potential evidence of survival, West always remained cautious, emphasising how it was vital to distinguish between scientific evidence and personal belief-led evidence. This approach reflected that of Dr Alan Gauld who had written *Mediumship and Survival* (1982) reviewing some of the best of the evidence, but when in the mid-1990s three leading SPR members endorsed physical phenomena occurring in séances held at Scole in Norfolk (see **FT130:6, 132:22–24, 135:53, 261:64–65, 300:19**), West was amongst those remaining unconvinced. Scole seemed to herald a new era of spirit photography, slate-writing and trumpet-blowing, purported levitations and the generation of ectoplasmic forms and lights, the things once so popular. West highlighted his dissatisfaction, declaring these investigations as "sadly lacking both in the familiar controls of the past – searches and immobilisation of the mediums – and in modern controls, such as infra-red photography." (See *The Scole Report* (M Keen, A Ellison & D Fontana, 1999, 2012).

Meanwhile, interesting results were being recorded in mental mediumship by experienced researchers such as Professor Archie Roy and Tricia Robertson of the Scottish SPR. West was also impressed by the approach taken by Emily Kelly and Dianne Arcangel into readings by mediums supplied only with photographs of the deceased. ('An Investigation of Mediums Who Claim to Give Information About Deceased Persons' (2011) by Emily Williams Kelly and Dianne Arcangel). He

considered their methodology as effective for verifying not only the paranormal element, but as potentially a step towards obtaining data relevant on the source of the communications.

In his final years, West dedicated himself to completing a joint study and full exposure of the doctoring of figures in telepathy tests conducted by psychologist SG Soal in the 1940s, which went undetected until 1978. (see *Dr Soal: A Psychic Enigma* by Donald J West and Betty Markwick, *Proceedings of the SPR*, vol.60, part.224). Left open were Soal's motives for fraud, but West felt it vital to put the record straight.

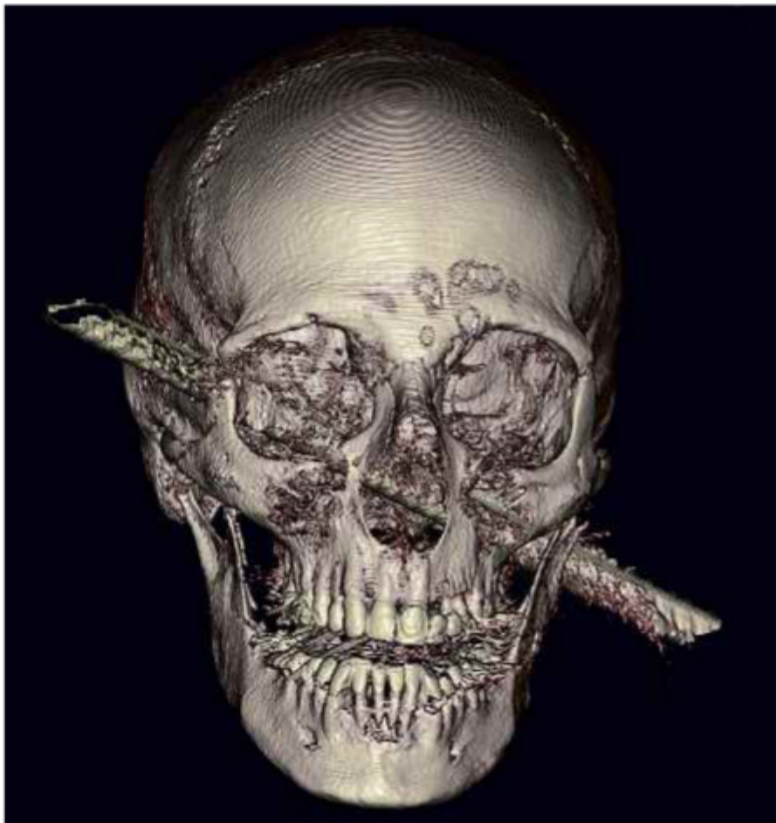
My final conversation on ghosts and survival with Donald took place at the offices of the SPR in 2018. After a lifetime, his conclusions were that some people who report encountering a ghost need to see a psychiatrist. However, others may have genuinely undergone some inexplicable experience. We also discussed current survival research, agreeing that Trevor Hamilton's book *Arthur Balfour's Ghosts* (2017), about the voluminous and enigmatic cross-correspondence communications received by mediums in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, presented the most important re-evaluation of positive historic evidence for many years. Accordingly, he considered the continuing search for proof remained not only worthwhile but essential.

To the best of my knowledge, Donald West has not, unlike some psychical researchers, left a posthumous secret code or puzzle to be solved by mediums as a test and proof for his post-mortem survival. So in the absence of any such communications to date, let me say: "Donald West, R.I.P."



## MEDICAL BAG

This month in the doctor's waiting room, a man with an iron rod through his head and a woman whose internal organs are the wrong way round...



ABOVE LEFT: A scan showing the iron rod that penetrated Kamel Abdel Rahman's head. ABOVE RIGHT: Thanks to the work of Dr Samuel Moscovici and the surgeons at Hadassah Ein Kerem hospital, Mr Rahman appears to have made a full recovery.

### MEDICAL MIRACLE IN JERUSALEM

46-year-old Kamel Abdel Rahman had gone to visit the Jerusalem apartment he is building for his family when he turned the wrong way and fell from the second floor onto an iron rod that penetrated straight through his head. "I couldn't move, so I called for help – I was shouting," he recalled. "I was conscious and I did not feel any pain at all. I do not know how to explain it."

Taken to Hadassah Ein Kerem hospital, he was seen by Dr Samuel Moscovici from the Neurosurgery department. "When I got to the trauma room, I saw a man with an iron rod through his head – it just went through, one side to the other," the doctor said. "After we ensured the patient was breathing, we conducted various imaging tests to find out where the rod was positioned, what it had hit and whether it could be removed."

Fortunately, the imaging tests showed that the rod had passed between the two important arteries supplying blood to the

brain without having damaged them. However, doctors were concerned there might be a rupture that wasn't visible because the rod was blocking it. If the rod was removed and the artery started bleeding, a swift death would follow. Before very carefully removing the rod, doctors analysed the wound for several hours. At the same time, nose and throat doctors were analysing the rod's penetration near the ear. After its removal, Prof Jose Cohen, head of Haddasah's Endovascular Neurosurgery Unit, performed a brain catheterisation to ensure the brain arteries were undamaged.

After a few days' pause to allow the head swelling to go down, doctors re-analysed the situation and opted for a second surgical procedure; endoscopic nose surgery to reduce the trauma and the post-operative recovery time. The operation took 10 hours, during which cerebrospinal fluid leakage was repaired and fat taken from Rahman's abdomen was used to hermetically seal the base of the skull. Three weeks after

admission, he was discharged from hospital. "I have no words," said Rahman. "They saved my ability to speak and walk. They saved my life." *jpost.com*, 13 May 2020.

### ITCHING DISEASE

Armando Perez was three months old when he became itchy, so bad that he had scabs on his arms and legs and left bloodstained sheets. His mother initially thought an allergy was to blame, switching laundry detergent and body washes several times. But they made no difference, and then Armando's skin turned yellow. Blood tests detected progressive familial intra-hepatic cholestasis, a very rare genetic liver disease affecting one in 50,000 to 100,000 children born around the world. 40 to 80 cases are diagnosed in the USA each year. The condition causes bile acids to be stuck in the liver, inhibiting its ability to absorb vitamins, eventually leading to cirrhosis and growth delays. Not being able to be processed in the liver, bile acids go backwards into the bloodstream

again, causing severe itching which can go on day and night. There is no cure, and Armando is likely to require a liver transplant by the age of 10. *Toronto Star*, 28 Dec 2019.

### ORGASM WOE

A 61-year-old woman who experiences uncontrollable orgasms without sexual desire said the condition, known as Persistent Genital Arousal Disorder (PGAD), has ruined her life. In 2017 the East Dumbartonshire woman had undergone a botched smear test at Glasgow's Stobhill Hospital which damaged her pudendal nerve. A month later, she began to experience "distressing symptoms" and has lived a reclusive life since then. "Most of the time I feel like I am sitting on an ant's nest", she told a hearing at NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde health board, and explained how there are times when "it's a tickle all day, but then something sets it off and it's a full-blown orgasm." Driving over potholes, aircraft turbulence, riding escalators, experiencing vibrations from musical instruments at concerts – these and other situations are liable to instigate her unwanted climaxes. She has tried various cures for her condition, including numbing gels, pelvic floor exercises and steroid injections. None, however, has proved effective. Her request to be treated abroad was declined by the NHS health board, who dispute the smear test was the cause of her condition and referred her to a London specialist. *D.Star, Metro*, 24 July 2019.

### MIRROR IMAGE ORGANS

Five Oregon medical students examining the body of Rose Marie Bentley, a 99-year-old woman who had died from natural causes, noticed something unusual when they opened the chest cavity. Her heart lacked a large vein

normally on the right-hand side. One student, Warren Nielsen, 26, called their supervising professors to ask: “Where’s the inferior vena cava? Are we missing it? Are we crazy?”

The professors rolled their eyes, Nielsen recalled, assuming the students had failed to identify this large blood vessel. But when they came over to look, “that’s when the hubbub starts. They’re like ‘Oh, my God, this is totally backwards!’”

A typical body’s vena cava follows the right-hand side of the vertebral column, curving under the liver and emptying deoxygenated blood into the heart. Bentley’s vein was on the left, and instead of terminating directly into the heart, as is usual, it continued through her diaphragm, along the thoracic vertebræ, up and around and over the aortic arch, emptying into the right side of her heart.

Her body had several other irregularities; numerous veins that typically drain the liver and other parts of the chest cavity were either missing or sprouted from an unusual place. Her right lung had only two lobes, instead of the standard three, and the right atrium of her heart was twice normal size. And rather than having a stomach on the left, as is normal, hers was on the right. Similarly, the liver, usually situated mainly on the right, was predominantly on the left. Her spleen was



ABOVE: Rose Marie Bentley, whose internal organs were reversed.

on the right instead of the left. The rest of her digestive tract, the ascending colon, was inverted... and so on.

Rose Marie Bentley had lived with a very rare condition called *situs inversus with levocardia*, in which most of the vital organs are reversed – in effect, a mirror image. The condition begins early in life, possibly between 30 and 45 days into pregnancy, and no-one knows why. It is so rare that it occurs in only 1 out of 22,000 babies and is invariably associated with severe congenital heart disease, as a result of which, only five to 13 per cent live beyond the age of five. Ms Bentley, however, was an anomaly, one of very few born with the condition but without heart defects.

Aside from chronic heartburn (probably caused by her unusual gastric anatomy), Bentley never suffered any ill-effects from her condition, said 76-year-old Ginger Robbins, one of Rose Marie’s three children. “We had no reason to believe there was anything like that wrong,” Ginger said. “She was always very healthy. She was always doing something, taking us to Campfire Girls, fishing, swimming. She was an excellent swimmer.”

The only hint that anything might be amiss came when Rose Marie’s appendix was removed, said 66-year-old Louise Allee, the fourth and youngest of her daughters. “The surgeon made a note that her appendix wasn’t in the right spot when they took it out,” Allee said, “but never said anything to us. Nobody said a thing when they took her gallbladder out and did a hysterectomy, either.”

“I think the odds of finding another person like her may be as remote as one in 50 million,” said assistant professor Cameron Walker, who teaches the Foundations of Clinical Anatomy class at Oregon Health and Science University. *edition.cnn.com*, 9 Apr; (Victoria BC) *Times Colonist* (Canada), 10 Apr 2019.

# MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

## 251: ICELANDIC BANANAS



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

### The myth

Iceland is the biggest producer of bananas in Europe.

### The “truth”

It might be Portugal, or Spain, or France (depending on your views concerning the controversies alluded to in ‘Disclaimer,’ below), but it certainly isn’t Iceland. It’s true that the Icelanders have been growing ‘nanas successfully since the middle of the last century, using geothermal energy (a natural resource in which their land is rich) to heat greenhouses. Early hopes of self-sufficiency were soon dashed by the realisation that you need not only heat but sunlight to produce tropical fruits. Bananas will grow in Iceland’s greenhouses, but very slowly; far too slowly ever to be a commercial crop. Memories of these experiments seem to have survived as folklore in the rest of Europe, and Icelandic horticulturalists are often asked by foreigners about their mythical banana plantations. The fruit is still produced on a small scale at the Agricultural University, but it’s not for sale – it’s eaten by the staff and students. The bananas in the shops in Iceland are imported.

### Disclaimer

<https://grapevine.is/mag/articles/2013/12/02/the-mythical-banana-kingdom-of-iceland/>; <https://www.icelandreview.com/news/one-hundred-banana-trees-iceland/>

### Sources

If you would care to engage in long-running, irascible debate about which commercial banana plantations are situated in Europe proper, you are very welcome to do so within FT’s letters pages.

### Mythchaser

A reader recently involved in the humane eviction of a mouse from a garage was given the familiar warning that when you release a live mouse you must do so at least a mile away because if you don’t, it will find its way home. He wondered if there’s any evidence for this...





## RELIGION ROUND-UP | Saint Januarius's blood liquifies in Palermo, while UK authorities fear an increase in witchcraft accusations

### BLOODY MIRACLE IN NAPLES

The blood of early Christian martyr St Januarius has reportedly liquified again at the Cathedral of the Assumption of Mary in Naples, otherwise known as Cattedrale di San Gennaro. St Januarius, patron saint of Naples, was a bishop of Naples in the third century AD. Also known as Januarius I of Benevento, he is believed to have been martyred during the Diocletian persecution. His bones and blood are preserved in the cathedral as relics, the blood contained in two sealed glass ampoules in a silver reliquary.

During the reputed miracle, the dried, red-coloured mass confined to one side of the reliquary becomes blood covering the entire glass. Although popularly accepted as a genuine miracle in Naples, it has not been officially recognised by the Vatican. The liquefaction reportedly occurs at least three times a year: 19 September, the saint's feast day, the Saturday before the first Sunday of May, and 16 December, the anniversary of the 1631 eruption of Mount Vesuvius. Local lore says that the failure of the blood



to liquefy foretells war, famine, disease or another disaster; the last time that happened was on 16 December 2016.

Archbishop of Naples Cardinal Sepe announced in a live-streamed Mass that the miracle had recurred on 2 May. "How many times our saint has intervened to save us from the plague, from cholera," he declared, using the liquified blood to bless the city. The traditional St Januarius procession to celebrate the miracle was cancelled due to coronavirus restrictions, and public masses have been forbidden in Italy since March.

The Cardinal praised health care workers combatting the virus in Naples, but added that "there is another possible epidemic that worries me in the most dangerous neighbourhoods in the city," referring to the Camorra, the Neapolitan mafia. "There are those who are good at making a fortune in times of epidemic... Let's move, intervene immediately, because the underworld is faster than our bureaucracy. The Camorra does not wait. It is up to us to get rid of all [criminal] organisations." Anti-mafia experts have warned that Italy's organised crime groups could take advantage of Italian police having to focus their resources on enforcing the lockdown, and that they may profit from government aid measures intended to assist industries.

The Feast of San Gennaro celebrated on 19 September has been a popular event in New York's Little Italy district since 1926, featuring prominently in Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* and also in *The Godfather Part III*. *catholicnewsagency.com*, 3 May 2020. See also FT16:5, 51:23, 52:4, 65:36-41, 82:48, 117:8, 350:8-9.

### VIRTUAL EXORCISM

Practising exorcist Paul Devlin believes the coronavirus pandemic could lead to an increase in demonic possession. The Buddhist priest, who described his first possessed victim as having "pointed teeth" and "black eyes", warned that demonic entities could take advantage of the current fear and uncertainty. "It is a very difficult time for everybody. The coronavirus has created a lot of fear and a lot of negativity," said Devlin. "There is not a lot of positive stuff around at the moment – that's the kind of thing that dark forces use to their advantage." He especially advised those in self-isolation to be on guard for negative emotions, which, he claimed, could attract malevolent forces.

"A vast majority of demonic possessions come from human emotions," he explained. "Although there have been a lot of acts of kindness and messages of support throughout this pandemic, there has also been a lot of frustration and anger and these can be breeding grounds for demons and negative energies. This can lead to demonic energy that builds and feeds on the human emotions which over time can incubate into a demonic consciousness. Once that happens things can get worse very quickly."

Although many businesses have had to adapt to the lockdown, Devlin says he would be reluctant to carry out exorcisms over Skype because of their violent nature. Doing "exorcisms without face-to-face contact," is possible, but very difficult, he explained. Demonic entities will "go down fighting" if they are being evicted from their host, which can lead to displays of aggression and unnatural feats of strength. "They can lash out at the host's family and cause much damage," he continued. "I feel it would be unfair for the family to be left to deal with that," but added that if it was a "life or death situation then obviously I would have to make that call."

As well as being an exorcist,



TOP: The ampoule containing the liquified blood of Saint Januarius is held up for the faithful during one of 2014's miracles.

ABOVE: A soldier of the Italian Army conducts a sanitising operation inside the Chapel of St Januarius in the Cathedral of Naples.



Devlin is a trained therapist, and recommends people combat their feelings of fear and uncertainty with positivity. “Nothing is forever,” he says. “Fear is just information; change the information to a positive and you will change fear itself.” *dailystar.co.uk*, 16 May 2020.

## UK'S EXORCISM INDUSTRY

A government-ordered inquiry heard evidence of an “industry of exorcisms happening in the UK” earlier this year. The Independent Inquiry into Child Abuse (IICSA) is examining alleged abuse in religious organisations and settings. Representatives from Britain’s Muslim, Sikh and South Asian communities told the inquiry that exorcism was greatly on the increase. “When I was younger, it almost didn’t even exist,” one witness said, and recalled that in the past “you might have had someone that would pray and blow on you or pray on some water and give you that water to drink.” A 2019 study found that reports of child abuse linked to beliefs in witchcraft, spirit possession or black magic had risen from 1,460 cases in 2016-17 to 1,950 in 2018-2019. *S.Telegraph*, 17 May 2020.

## WITCHCRAFT ALLEGATIONS

A Metropolitan Police inspector has warned that the coronavirus pandemic could lead to a rise in allegations of witchcraft against children and vulnerable people who may be falsely blamed for having caused it. Beliefs in witchcraft and possession appear in some African and Asian diaspora communities, frequently triggering violence in Tanzania, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya and Malawi. In the UK, such beliefs were a component of the case of Victoria Climbié, the nine-year-old girl tortured and killed by her great-aunt and her partner in February 2000 (FT321:21). There have been several other deaths in the UK resulting from these practices, including an eight-year-old girl who was tortured, and a 15-year-old boy who drowned during an exorcism. In the last year, police identified nearly 2,000 children believed to be at risk of abuse linked to faith and belief in England.

The Met’s lead on this issue, Inspector Allen Davis, said the



ABOVE: Van Dyke’s “Saint Rosalie Interceding for the Plague-stricken of Palermo” will go on timely display in New York’s Metropolitan Museum from July.

## Plague ravaged Palermo, killing 10 per cent of its population

pandemic may be “seen through a spiritual lens by those who have a belief in witchcraft,” and added: “These beliefs are extremely common and in many parts of the world they are the norm, not the exception. We’re concerned with a rise in accusations against vulnerable individuals who will be labelled as witches and for having caused the misfortune.” A related concern is that unscrupulous faith leaders will stoke people’s fears by performing potentially dangerous exorcisms or offering fake cures, such as the £91 Divine Plague Protection Oil sold by a South London church (FT393:6).

An additional factor is that, according to a recent study, Black African deaths linked to Covid-19 are 3.5 times higher than those of White people in Britain, even after having allowed for differences in age, sex and geography. It is not yet known whether the disproportionately high coronavirus death rate among Black and Asian people in the UK is due to genetic, environmental or cultural factors (or a combination of all three).

Detective Sergeant Kate Bridger of Scotland Yard’s Harmful Practices team cited the Tanzanian president’s call for national prayer instead of a lockdown (FT394:51-52) as an example of influential people spreading harmful messages. “This is the time to build our faith and continue praying to God, and not depend on face masks,” President John Magufuli told a church service. “Don’t stop going to churches and mosques for prayers.” A widely-

circulated video made by Chris Oyakhilome, a popular Nigerian pastor, linked Covid-19 to 5G networks and a plot to create a “new world order”. And in Cameroon, Frankline Ndifor, a pastor who claimed he could cure coronavirus by laying on of hands, recently died of coronavirus aged 39. When authorities attempted to enter his residence, they had to use tear gas to disperse a crowd of his followers who were blocking entry while they prayed for his resurrection.

Anxious parents or families can turn to pastors and prophets who then often confirm the family’s belief that their child is possessed, explained Inspector Davis. “Families do not necessarily do it because they don’t love their child,” he said, but have “a genuine belief and think they’re protecting them by ridding them of evil.” *independent.co.uk*, 1 May; *huffingtonpost.co.uk*, 21 May 2020.

## ST ROSALIA RETURNS

An exhibition to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, postponed until July owing to the coronavirus lockdown, was to feature one of the Met’s earliest acquisitions, a 1624 Anthony Van Dyke painting entitled “Saint Rosalie Interceding for the Plague-stricken of Palermo”. The work, purchased by the Met in 1870, was made while Van Dyke was in the Sicilian capital, which, with its port closed and city gates shut, was quarantined while plague ravaged the city, killing 10 per cent of its population.

During this desperate period, Franciscan monks digging on Monte Pellegrino, a hill facing the harbour, discovered a pile of bones in a cave. These were determined to be the bones of Saint Rosalia, a noblewoman who had lived several centuries earlier. As the epidemic waned, her relics were paraded through Palermo where its grateful citizens worshipped her as their saviour and she was proclaimed the city’s patron saint. Today, Sicily’s infection rate has been far lower than other Italian provinces, but its tourist industry has been devastated by the pandemic. *NY Times Int. Ed.*, 30 Mar 2020.

## STRANGE CONTINENT

ULRICH MAGIN scours the papers for the weirdest news stories from a coronavirus-ravaged Europe...



ABOVE LEFT: A lockdown protester in Alexanderplatz, Berlin. ABOVE RIGHT: German singer Xavier Naidoo is one of the celebrities spreading Covid-19 conspiracy theories.

### IN THE GRIP OF DISINFO

There is a lapse in time between my writing this and you reading it. As of now, social distancing is still in place here in Germany, although the country is slowly opening up again.

Like most of the continent, we have not only had to endure the virus, but outbreaks of conspiracy theories and fake news; these have now become topics for mainstream discussion. In Germany, the news spread on social media that the virus had been produced by either Bill Gates, Israel, or China; that it was caused by radiation from the new 5G phone network; and that it does not even exist but is a plot by Angela Merkel to distract people from witnessing a mass immigration of Muslims who she plans to use to replace ethnic Germans (on the orders of George Soros, naturally).

Others believe coronavirus is a stunt to impose vaccination laws on the population, and vaccination does horrible things to your body. These German ‘anti-vaxxers’ (see FT377:16-17,

380:26) have grown in number and increased in loudness; they demonstrate in every major German city, shouting “fake news journalists” – essentially any that do not believe in a conspiracy of some kind.

You name it, some “dissenter” believes it and tweets about it. German soul singer Xavier Naidoo now advocates that the coronavirus pandemic is a fake event being used to smuggle millions of abducted children from the underground factories where they were tortured to harvest adrenochrome for Hilary Clinton, only to face a still grimmer life, the details of which are not specified. And prominent German vegan chef Attila Hildmann has announced that he will arm himself and go underground to fight the powers who spread the virus, who are led by chief Satanist Bill Gates.

Gates is implicated because he founded an NGO to spread vaccination; several protesters believe this is simply a means by which each of us will be

injected with microchips. Hildmann predicted the official start of dictatorship in Germany as 15 May, but was still leading rallies against Gates three days later. And while many declare coronavirus is an outright invention, there are also claims that it was produced for Soros in Wuhan to harm the American economy so that Trump will not be re-elected.

There have also been other odd allegations. One was that helicopters are being used to spray anti-viral disinfectants. People receive WhatsApp warnings not to go outside at certain times when the dangerous mixture will be released from the air. However, such a mass spraying would be inefficient and a waste of money, and has never taken place, according to authorities. Examples of such postings were recorded in Bavaria and in Vienna, Austria, and in Britain too. *correctiv.org*, *web.de*, 24 Mar; *Deutschlandfunk*, 16 Apr; *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 May; *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 9 May 2020.

### VILLAGE OF THE SAVED

At the same time as this flood of disinformation was spreading across Germany, newspapers reported that one small village in Lombardy, the Italian region most badly affected by the disease, was completely free of infections. The people of Ferrera Erbognone, 50 km (30 miles) from Milan, were the only ones in Pavia Province without a single person who had tested positive for the virus – and this despite the fact that most villagers are elderly. Mayor Giovanni Fassina said it was perhaps due to citizens’ strict obedience to the government’s measures, or perhaps to some unusual genetic, and suggested scientific tests be carried out by the institute Fondazione Mondino, in Pavia. Public health authorities ruled out such a study, however. Most German newspapers covered this story at the end of March and early in April, but I haven’t found anything on the town after that date – did they stay safe, as is to be hoped? *web.de*, 1 April 2020.



## VIRUS PREDICTED?

Then there is the interesting “prediction” of corona in the 2017 episode of the Asterix series. In book 37, *Asterix and the Chariot Race*, Julius Cæsar takes part in an Italian race disguised as a charioteer named Coronavirus. In the German edition, Cæsar is called Caligarius instead. *Nordkurier*, 9 Mar 2020.

## SAINT CORONA

And finally, there is St Corona, a patron saint against pestilence. Her feast day is 14 May, and she was born in modern Syria in the first century AD. She was martyred by the Romans who bound her to two palm trees bowed down which, when released, split her in two. Her remains were transferred to Aachen from Rome by Emperor Otto III in 997. She is still buried in Aachen’s wonderful eighth-century cathedral. Birgitta Falk, head of the Aachen Cathedral Treasury, explains that St Corona was originally invoked only by treasure seekers and butchers, but that one small community in Lower Austria, St Corona near Kirchberg am Wechsel, used to venerate her and plead for her help with thunderstorms, crop failure and livestock epidemics. From there, her fame as a protector against disease spread throughout Central Europe. Her main pilgrimage centre is St Corona am Schöpfl in Austria. *Allgemeine Zeitung [Namibia]*, 13 May 2020.

## MORE SKY TRUMPETS

The sound of trumpets announcing the last days are part of Christian as well as Muslim tradition, and pestilence is mentioned in Revelation. The trumpet sounds heard over the Netherlands (FT391:25) have not been an isolated occurrence – celestial trumpets blow all over Europe, and, indeed, the world.

Paul Seaburn, on his Mysterious Universe blog,



ABOVE: The centre of St Corona pilgrimage in St Corona am Schöpfl, Austria.

lists instances of “Strange Noises in the Sky Heard in Argentina, Slovakia, the U.S. and Brazil”. On 3 April, several videos were shot in the Slovak capital Bratislava in which “trumpet sounds” can be heard; as Seaburn points out, they sounded more like “Darth Vader breathing”. Scientists explained the sounds as tectonic stress noise from the plates below the Adriatic Sea, but this would not apply to the earlier Dutch trumpets.

Starting in the middle of March in the Valtenesi in Upper Italy, and continuing well into April, people reported strange ‘vibrations’ in the night sky. In April, the strange sound was heard all over the western banks of Lake Garda, Italy, “from Toscolano Maderno to the hinterland of Gargnano... Almost everyone agrees on the ‘vibrating’ noise that comes and goes at different intensities. From Maderno to Navazzo di Gargnano, on the night of Easter Sunday/Monday, many said they heard the sound.” Originally, aircraft heading to Verona were blamed, but the Italian lockdown ruled out this explanation. Also, there were far fewer cars on the roads. Although the incidents were widely discussed on social media, “nobody has been able to provide an explanation”. *BresciaOggi*, 14 Apr 2020.

Four days later, “blood rain” fell in Germany, but as usual

this was explained by red Sahara sand blown northward by storms. *mysteriousuniverse.org*, 7 Apr; *BresciaOggi*, 14 Apr; *web.de*, 18 Apr 2020.

## MASS BIRD DEATHS

Something else has been brewing in European skies. In April, thousands of migratory birds died in Greece due to cold winds. Or strong winds, or low rainfall, or too much rain – all reasons that have been given. So, due to a combination of many different factors, as ornithologists explained, many birds were found dead in the streets and on the balconies of Athens, in northern Greece, close to Nafplio on the Peloponnese, and on many Aegean islands.

At the same time in Germany, blue tits (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) were dying en masse. Germany’s environment protection agency Naturschutzbund Deutschland (NABU) asked people to report casualties from their gardens. The first cases were on 11 March on the middle Rhine, in Hesse and Thuringia; by 8 April, 150 dead tits had been noted. NABU hoped that a bird autopsy would reveal the cause of the deaths. By Easter, they had received over 11,000 reports concerning sick or dead birds. NABU explained a week later that the tits had all died from pneumonia due to an infection by *Suttonella ornithocola*. The bacterium

was first discovered in 1966, in England and Wales, and caused the first mass death of tits in 2018 in North Rhine-Westphalia. *nabu.de*, 10 April; *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 11+18 Apr; *web.de*, 23 Apr 2020.

## BLACK MASS MISS

On a lighter note, on 7 March Italian Police mistook a music video shoot on the shores of Lake Como for a black mass, which they tried to stop. Neighbours, whose fear of dark Satanic rituals was probably exacerbated by the coronavirus, raised the alarm when they observed a burning cross and figures in red cloaks on one of the lake’s beaches in the middle of the night: were these people Satanists, summoning up the Prince of Darkness? Police investigated and Commander Massimo Castelli clarified the situation within a few seconds: it was just a film crew shooting a music video, and the 2m cross had been illuminated by spotlights, not set on fire. *La Provincia di Como*, 8 Mar 2020.

## BLEAK PROSPECTS

Bulgarian prophet Baba Wanga who died in 1996 (see FT93:8, 351:20-21, 382:17) had this to say about the year 2020: There will be an attempt on the life of Vladimir Putin by someone from his inner circle; the prophet was unsure whether or not Putin would survive; President Trump will suffer from a mysterious disease which leaves him deaf and which will be diagnosed as a brain tumour; and Europe’s economy will suffer a severe economic crisis (this, at least, has come true). Muslim hordes will attack, and Europe will be depopulated by the end of the year. In December, a meteorite will hit Russia, with catastrophic results.

It should be noted that many of the same prophecies had previously been trotted out for 2018; but, in retrospect, it seems Baba Wanga knew nothing about Covid-19. *Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland*, 13 Jan 2020.



## NECROLOG

This month, we say goodbye to a controversial artist and esoterrorist, and the German survival expert and activist who exposed a fake Brazilian Indian chief



ABOVE LEFT: Genesis P-Orridge became Breyer P-Orridge after extensive surgery. ABOVE RIGHT: Rüdiger Nehberg in the wilderness with an eight-legged friend.

### GENESIS P-ORRIDGE

Neil Andrew Megson was born in Manchester in 1950, to loving middle-class parents. It was his enrolment at the independent Solihull School in 1964 that marked the beginning of his career as a radical entrepreneur. Discovering likeminded school-friends, similarly enchanted by the occult, William Burroughs and the Velvet Underground, led to the formation of his first performance group, WORM, in 1967. Influenced by free music experimentalists AMM, their first performance in Solihull, *Beautiful Litter* (1968), was met with critical bemusement. A brief stint at the University of Hull followed in 1969, and although he found the atmosphere of radical politics stimulating it failed to offer an environment through which he could explore his own identity. However, time spent, later that year, at the London based Transmedia Commune, catalysed his artistic and spiritual development through the recognition of an alternative lifestyle as cultural interrogation.

By 1970 and based in Hull, Megson had become Genesis P-Orridge and co-founded the performance group COUM Transmissions with fellow artist John Shapiro, later to be joined

by Christine Newby (Cosey Fanni Tutti) who became his muse and long-term collaborator (her recent memoir also suggests she was also the victim of his sustained sexual abuse). Early Dadaist spectacles such as *Thee Fabulous Mutations* (1969) and *The Clockwork Hot Spoiled Acid Test* (1969) attracted local interest and led to an appearance on Radio Humberside. Capitalising on this exposure the troupe took to the streets with *Absolute Everywhere* (1971) and *Riot Control* (1971), but as their playfulness turned into more confrontational encounters police attention soon followed and opportunities to perform dwindled. Although championed by celebrity DJ John Peel and in receipt of funding from Yorkshire Arts, such unwanted attention, especially as COUM now fronted a publishing wing, prompted a move to London.

With Arts Council patronage COUM Transmissions became a fixture on the European performance art scene, its reputation enhanced by *Art Vandals* (1973) at the Edinburgh Festival and the travelling exhibition *Flux-shoe*. Lauded by their peers, celebrity became notoriety as the 'red top' media response to their ICA show *PROSTITUTION* in 1976 failed to see past

the tampons and pornography. Denounced in parliament as 'wreckers of civilisation', COUM saw the writing on the wall and focused their energies on the band Throbbing Gristle, an 'anti-musical' group made up of P-Orridge, Fanni Tutti, Peter Christopherson and Chris Carter. Debuting at the *PROSTITUTION* show Throbbing Gristle – "a confluence of pornography, violence, death... and paganism" according to theologian Christopher Partridge – exploited extreme imagery, lighting and noise to derange the audience. P-Orridge called an end to the TG project in June 1981, sending out postcards stating that "the mission is terminated".

Now married with two children, Genesse and Caresse, he established Psychic TV – a musical collective heavily influenced by the work of Crowley, William Burroughs and Austin Osman Spare and with a remit to explore dissociative compositional techniques and new technologies, which he described as 'esoterrorism'. For many, this is where his legacy truly lies as Psychic TV, along with his parodic magical 'cult' (which some ex-members have claimed operated at times like a real and coercive one),

Thee Temple ov Psychic Youth, provided an apprenticeship for fellow travellers as David Tibet, Steve Stapleton and John Balance and their musical projects Current 93, Nurse With Wound and Coil.

Forced to leave Britain in 1992 following false accusations of child abuse made in a Channel 4 *Dispatches* documentary, he sought refuge in the United States where he met and later married Jacqueline Beyer (Lady Jaye), a nurse and dominatrix. Such was their love for each other that they embarked on a programme of radical body-modification surgery, spending \$200,000 in order to transform each into the other – *The Pandrogeny Project* – establishing a single 'pandrogenous' being to be known as 'Breyer P-Orridge'. Lady Jaye's death in 2007 proved devastating, but P-Orridge maintained a busy schedule of band reunions and artistic engagements up until his own diagnosis with cancer; his adopted city of Hull celebrated his life and work as a part of the City of Culture year in 2017.

With over 200 recordings and innumerable artworks to his name, P-Orridge's legacy is celebrated and condemned in equal measure.



Genesis P-Orridge, artist, musician and occultist, born Neil Andrew Megson, Victoria, Manchester, 22 Feb 1950; died New York City, 14 Mar 2020, aged 70. Chris Hill

## RÜDIGER NEHBERG

German survival expert and human rights activist Rüdiger Nehberg has died, aged 84. He was a pastry chef in Hamburg, where he opened a chain of bakeries, but went on to cross the Atlantic on a tree trunk, paddle to the sources of the Nile, and shock TV audiences by confessing that he ate worms while in the jungle. In the process he became widely known as “Sir Vival”. He became increasingly active in various causes, such as fighting against female genital mutilation in Africa and highlighting the plight of the Yanomami in the Brazilian rainforest.

While in Brazil, he came into contact with ‘Tatunca Nara’, an Indian chief who claimed he knew of secret Nazi bases and a hidden prehistoric city called Akakor where ancient alien technology could still be found. Akakor was the subject of several books by fortune authors, but Nehberg proved that the alleged Indian chief was in fact a German criminal called Günther Hauck who had fled the law and relocated in Brazil; also, said Nehberg, Hauck had quite possibly murdered several German tourists whom he had promised to guide to Akakor. Nehberg’s 1993 book *Der selbstgemachte Häuptling: Tatunca Nara alias Günther Hauck oder Der Mörder im Regenwald* (“The Self-Made Chief: Tatunca Nara aka Günther Hauck or The Murderer in the Rain Forest”) helped expose the hoax but ultimately failed to get Hauck convicted. Hauck’s stories of Akakor also informed the Indiana Jones movie *The Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*.

Rüdiger Nehberg, survival expert, adventurer, author and human rights activist, born Bielefeld, Germany, 4 May 1935; died Hamburg, 1 April 2020, aged 84. Ulrich Magin



## FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

### FIFTY FAIRIES

Michael Swords will be known to many FT readers. He is a stalwart of the UFO community, was a longtime editor of the *Journal of UFO Studies* and in recent years has written extensively on what we might very loosely call ‘fairies’ (fauns, black dogs, elves, ents...) on his blog at <http://thebiggeststudy.blogspot.com>. I recently asked Michael for an overview of his work and he was kind enough to write up a piece for the *Fairy Investigation Society Newsletter*. His views – and the years of experience that inform them – are so interesting (and the *Newsletter* so obscure!) that I wanted to give an outline here.

Michael has hundreds of records of fairy sightings catalogued. He is, though, very choosy. He rules out experiences including what he calls ‘credibility-lowering’ factors: e.g., “I had just been awakened by a noise”. He also prefers experiences where the writer has some real contact with the person whose experiences are being written up. Applying these sensible limits – the result, I suspect, of years working with UFO encounters – he has come up with 50 gold-standard fairy cases dating from the 1600s to recent times. He then draws out some common elements. Entities are between 1.5ft and 5ft (46-1352cm) tall with the “large majority” around 3ft (91cm) tall; most are “either gnomish, elfin-shaped, or

human-shaped”, with three fauns on record. Traditionalists will be glad to know that there are no wings.

Michael and I have very different approaches. He studies fairies through witnesses; I study the witnesses. This means that I’m indifferent to ‘credibility-lowering’ factors. I am fascinated, for instance, by

experiences on the cusp of sleep. I am much more pessimistic, meanwhile, about any attempt to measure the fluid and anarchic ‘supernatural’, in which I would include UFOs, sasquatches and ABCs. Fairies cannot, surely, be part of the physical world in any conventional sense; so I wonder how much can be learnt from charting physical characteristics, other than to show changing human ideas about fairies (ditto ghosts, demons/angels, aliens). The

filters for the 50 fairy sightings are necessarily rough and ready. There is, then, the danger that we let through some sightings and exclude some others in correspondence with our own ideas about what fairies should be. Having said that, I’d trust Michael’s instincts over my own in terms of ‘filters’ and, indeed, much else. He suggested, finally, that my own work with the Fairy Census is not enough for charting fairy sightings: to do things properly, it would be necessary to carry out follow-up interviews. I am sure that Michael is right. That would mean a lot of volunteers though...

MICHAEL HAS  
COME UP WITH 50  
GOLD-STANDARD  
FAIRY CASES  
DATING FROM THE  
1600s TO RECENT  
TIMES

# EFFECTS, LIES AND VIDEOTAPE

## 25 YEARS OF THE ALIEN AUTOPSY

A quarter of a century ago, tales of crashed flying saucers, dead aliens and government cover-ups were part of the *X-Files*-inspired zeitgeist. Then, one man claimed that the truth really was out there – and that he had the footage to prove it. **STU NEVILLE** goes back to the Nineties in an attempt to untangle the strange story of the Alien Autopsy film...

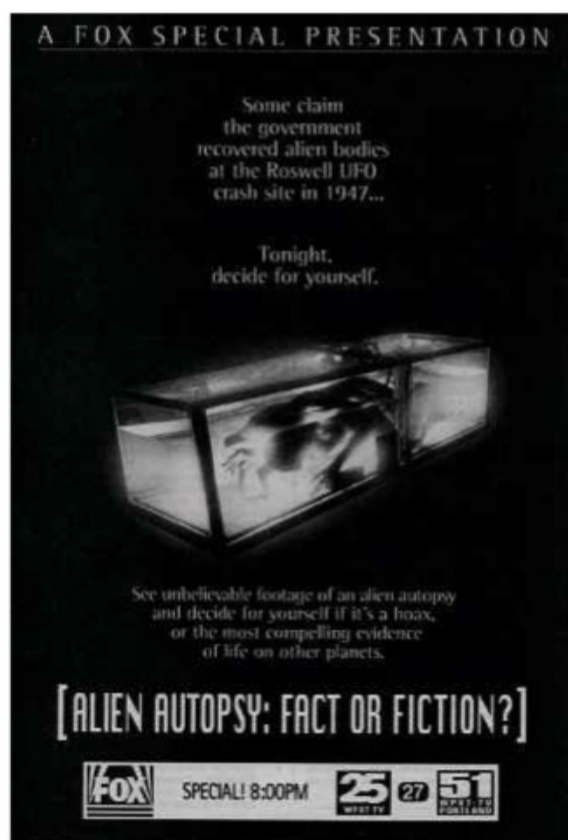
**T**he year was 1995. Public awareness of the UFO phenomenon and its associated motifs was at its zenith: paranormally-themed magazines sprang up by the dozen; *The X-Files* was riding high; the suddenly iconic image of the Grey alien was everywhere; Travis Walton and Whitley Strieber dined out on their apparent experiences of alien abduction and saw their stories turned into movies; and the Schwa corporation quietly took the piss out of it all.

Hints abounded of official knowledge of alien life, a notion mirrored and inadvertently reinforced by Mulder and Scully for an hour every Tuesday night. Suddenly, a whole nation was at least on nodding terms with UFO culture. Central to all of this was Roswell, alleged site of a crashed ‘flying saucer’ in 1947, and the subsequent retrieval of the craft (or at least bits of it), its technology, and even its inhabitants. As always, proof was seriously lacking; but as per usual in conspiracy circles, lack of evidence simply implies a cover-up: there had been persistent rumours of physical artefacts stored in (or possibly under) the hangars of Wright-Patterson AFB. Reports ranged from relatively modest accounts of handkerchief-sized pieces of metal that magically unfolded when crumpled up to stories that the whole complex was the unofficial Zeta Reticulian Embassy on Earth.

Into this cultural mix came word of an even juicier item: actual film of the autopsy supposedly performed on the crashed saucer’s extraterrestrial crew. Rumours had been circulating in ufological circles for a number of years that such footage was out there: for example, Mike Maloney, former Group Chief Photographer at Mirror Group, claimed to have had a private viewing in the late 1970s at the LA house of a Disney executive. Now, the footage was to be revealed to the wider world. The timing could not have been better.

### THE SANTILLI FILM

The story went that in 1992 Ray Santilli, a British home video entrepreneur, had



travelled to the USA in search of rare Elvis Presley footage. While he failed to find this, he claimed to have met a retired US Military cameraman with a much more interesting story to tell and film to back it up: the fabled alien autopsy footage, which the cameraman claimed to have shot. Santilli said he immediately realised the significance of the find, and just had to buy the 22 reels of film and bring them home. He would show them to the world, answer one of humanity’s biggest questions and, in so doing, make his

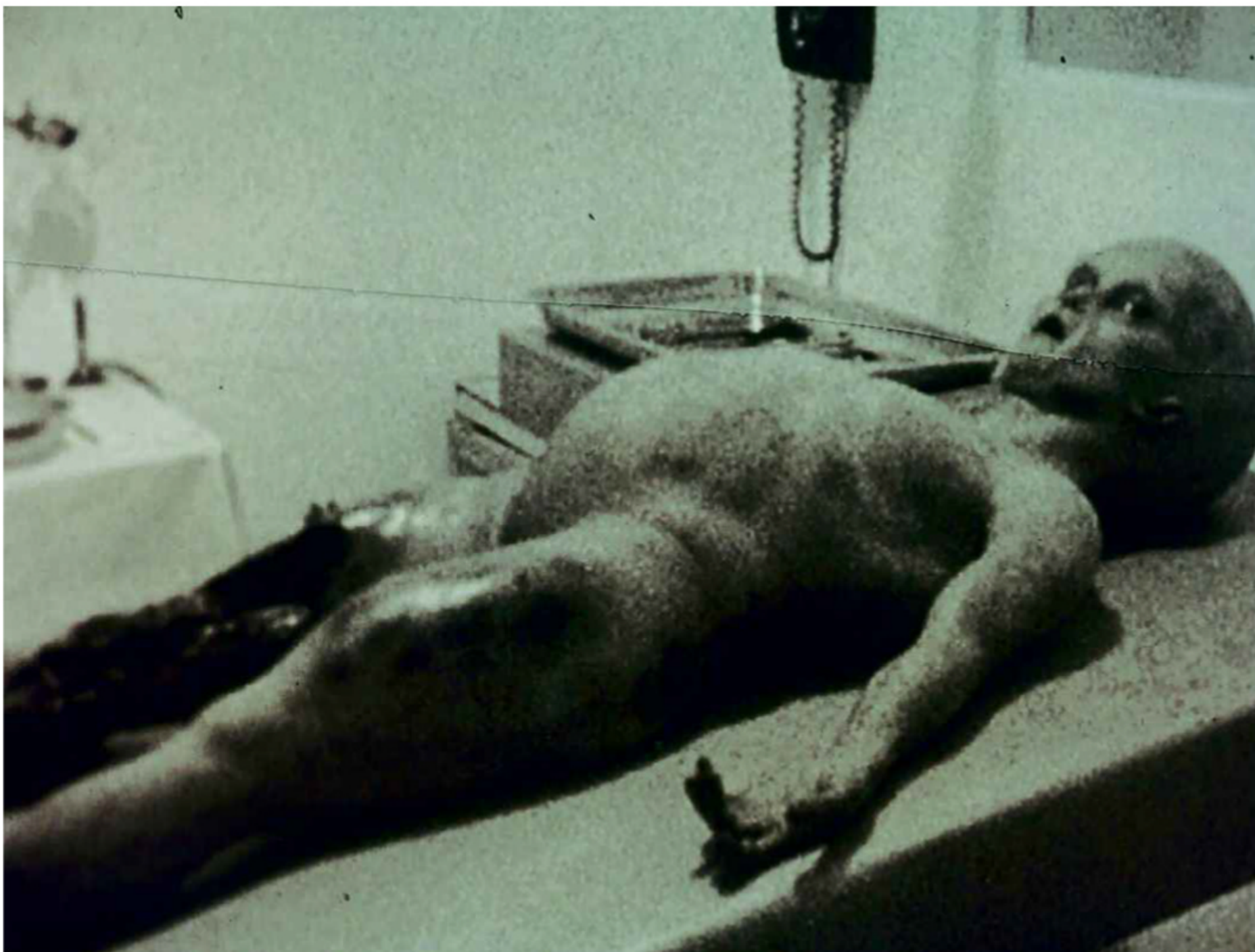
**LEFT:** “Tonight, decide for yourself”: An ad for the *Alien Autopsy: Fact or Fiction* special shown on Fox in 1995. **BELOW:** Fresh from the bridge of the *Enterprise*, Johnathan Frakes was the presenter.

investment back many times over.

A preview of the edited-down, 17-minute autopsy footage – Santilli claimed there was considerably more, including film of the crash site – was presented to journalists, including *FT*’s own Bob Rickard on 5 May 1995. Bob said at the time that the autopsied subject was “very humanoid. Immediate impression: clever model.” As the film progressed, Bob spotted a number of inconsistencies: the brain appeared to just lift out from the skull with no apparent attachment; none of the removed organs were measured, weighed, bagged or otherwise preserved in any way (you’d think they would be scrutinised down to a molecular level in the circumstances); and this all took place – according to the period-authentic clock on the wall – in just half an hour. Overall, Bob concluded that it was a “fantasy post-mortem on a fake ET,” and got the impression that others in the room felt much the same way. When someone from *UFO Magazine* started pressing Santilli about authentication, the latter picked up his bag and scarpered.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, wider anticipation of the film kept building, until on 28 August 1995, Channel Four in the UK broadcast the autopsy footage as a segment of *The Roswell Incident*, part of its *Secret History* series<sup>2</sup> (which usually covered rather more sober topics, such as the deception operations leading up to the D-Day landings, with occasional forays into more fortan areas). In keeping with the series’ usual format, it was unsensational; it related the story and the surrounding arguments, both pro and con, with comments from experts such as noted pathologist Dr Iain West of Guy’s Hospital and Special Effects specialist Bob Keen of Pinewood Studios, both of whom pronounced the film a clever fake.

At the same time, on the other side of the Atlantic, the first American showing was a



SPYROS MELARIS

ABOVE: A now iconic image of the dead alien on the autopsy table. Both the UK and US coverage included experts from various fields assessing the footage.

far less understated affair, enveloped as it was in a Fox special hosted by Commander Riker himself – Jonathan Frakes – with the title *Alien Autopsy: Fact or Fiction*.<sup>3</sup> Experts galore were wheeled on to pronounce upon its veracity, including pathologist Cyril Wecht, who said procedures in the film looked technically authentic, along with the make-up and effects specialist Stan Winston and cinematographer Allen Daviau. The whole thing was presented in such breathless and uncritical fashion that its conclusion appeared to be that here was proof that alien life existed – and that it had landed on Earth. Perhaps predictably, given the cultural atmosphere at the time, it caused an uproar: in fact, such was its impact that viewing figures actually went up on subsequent screenings. *Time* magazine went so far as to compare its significance with that of the Zapruder film of Kennedy’s assassination.<sup>4</sup>

However, behind the scenes, there were deep misgivings about the footage. John Jopson, the director putting together the other elements of the special – interview segments and so on – told producer Robert Kiviat that he suspected the entire thing to be a fake. Following his interview with Santilli he became convinced they were

## Nascent Internet forums lit up with people arguing for and against the film

being duped. The producers, with eyes firmly on the ratings, made it clear that any such suspicions would not be voiced, certainly not for the time being, at any rate. Stan Winston subsequently claimed that his interview was heavily edited to imply that he was unsure about whether or not the footage was fake, whereas, in fact, he had maintained from the start that it wasn’t genuine; and UFO investigator Kevin Randle had stated outright that it was a hoax, which also didn’t make the final cut.

At the time, though, this didn’t even break the surface, such was the brouhaha about the alien autopsy film. Entire magazines were created around the footage. Nascent Internet forums lit up with people arguing for or against it. The film received a great deal of

scrutiny. A detailed report in *Nexus* magazine (Oct 1996) by Michael Hesemann examined it from multiple angles, concluding: “While nobody has been able to present any proof that the Santilli autopsy footage was faked, we have some convincing indications that the film might very well be genuine. If it is a hoax, it is definitely the most ingenious fake of the century.”<sup>5</sup>

Mike Moloney, the *Mirror* photographer who claimed to have seen the film in the late 1970s, said he believed it to be the same footage. Others were less convinced. Philip Mantle of BUFORA, who had initially expressed optimism, has since spent the last 25 years examining both the footage and the story surrounding it (see interview, p37-40). As always, sceptics dismissed and believers endorsed, with the usual spectrum of opinion in between.

### ANT, DEC AND EAMONN

And so the debate rumbled on. By the end of the 1990s, public ardour for all things alien had abated considerably, and what had once been a whole tide of discussion had retreated, leaving just isolated rockpools of bickering.

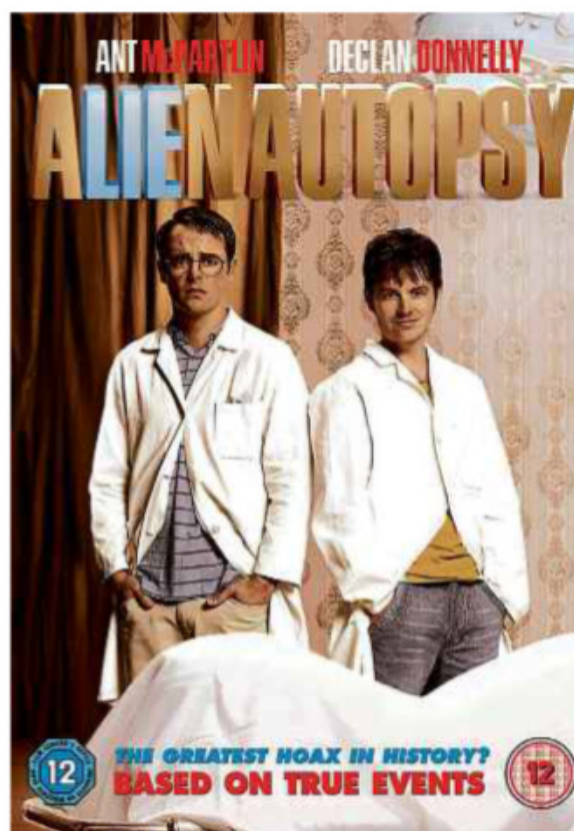
With the decline in interest, Santilli’s



ABOVE: The 2006 *Alien Autopsy* film starring British TV staples Ant and Dec played the story for laughs. BELOW: Eamonn Holmes helped further muddy the waters.

film must have become considerably less lucrative. It was perhaps unsurprising, then, that 10 years on, in 2005, it became known that a film was being made that would dramatise the events leading up to the original broadcast. A hint about the overall treatment of the saga could be found in the casting: the stars of the movie would be light entertainment fixtures Ant McPartlin and Declan Donnelly – better known as Ant & Dec. This would clearly not be a serious docudrama, rather a knockabout farce; which is, in fairness, how many UFO researchers would describe the whole story anyway.

The movie, *Alien Autopsy*, written by William Davies and directed by Jonny Campbell, was apparently based wholly on Santilli's description of events. It was due for general release in the UK on 7 April 2006. What seemed strange to many was that Santilli would knowingly and willingly participate in a film which made a comedy out of his putatively serious, earth-shattering discovery. In the words of Dr David Clarke in FT: "But why was the man who discovered 'The Greatest Story Ever Sold' selling out by making a comedy, even one billed as being 'based on true events'? The reason soon became clear: Santilli was finally going to reveal the real 'truth' about the AA film, and it could be no coincidence that this 'truth' was to be revealed just two days before the



film hit the cinemas on 7 April."<sup>6</sup>

And so it came to pass: on 4 April, Sky broadcast *Eamonn Investigates: Alien Autopsy*, featuring the forensic journalistic skills of TV presenter Eamonn Holmes being put to the test.<sup>7</sup> It was hardly Pulitzer material though; to quote Clarke again: "This was post-

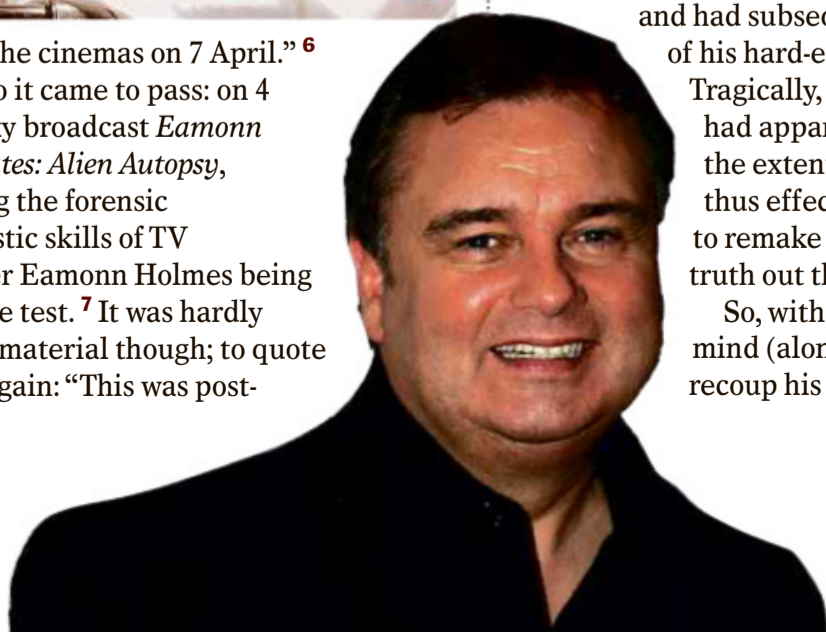
modern docu-comedy at its best (or worst), with all parties clearly in the know and hamming it up to create yet another 'truth' about the AA film."

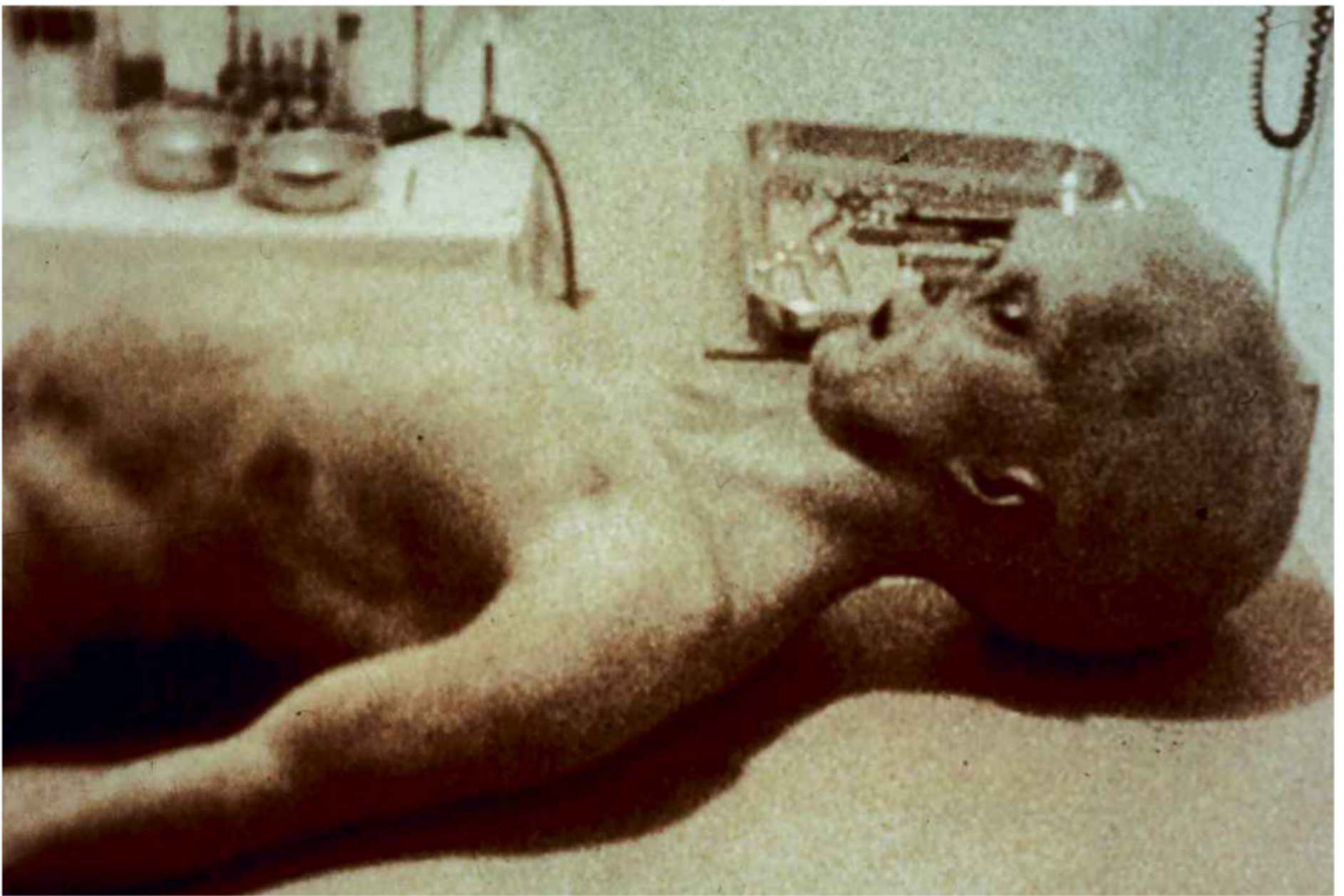
Santilli used it as a showcase to present his revised version of events before everyone else saw them re-enacted on the big screen by cheeky-chappie Geordies. He came clean, at least in part. The aliens in the autopsy film, he admitted, were actually fake and so (obviously) was the footage itself. The weird extraterrestrial internal organs? Sheep brains and jelly stuffed into puppets made by a local sculptor, John Humphreys, who also created various props that were presented as alien artefacts and who himself appeared in the sequence as one of the pathologists performing the post-mortem. However – and on this Santilli was quite clear – it *wasn't* a hoax. Oh no. The footage was in fact a faithful recreation of the real film Santilli had first seen back in 1992

and had subsequently spent so much of his hard-earned cash buying.

Tragically, that original footage had apparently degraded to the extent that it was unusable, thus effectively forcing Santilli to remake it in order to get the truth out there.

So, with the greater good in mind (alongside the need to recoup his alleged expenditure),





SPYROS MELARIS

ABOVE: By 2006, Santilli was claiming that his film was a fake – because the *real* footage was unusable. BELOW: Ex-military cameraman or elderly homeless guy?

he'd painstakingly remade the film frame by frame, incorporating the few elements of the original that had been salvageable – although he can't remember which bits these are now. The filmed statement by the alleged cameraman? An elderly homeless chap they'd found in Los Angeles, whom they'd showered, put into some thrift store clobber and got to recite a script to camera in a motel room. The whole thing allowed Santilli to come over as a loveable rogue, a wheeler-dealer who'd come across something amazing, suffered a major setback, but had used his ingenuity to overcome it – and in so doing reveal an amazing secret to the world in the best way he could in the absence of actual evidence. The imminent *Alien Autopsy* feature would tell the story. Enjoy the movie, then we can all move on. Everything was neatly tied up, then – happy days!

## REAL FAKES

Except... the saga has not remotely been neatly tied up.

As we see frequently with fortean events, narratives can take on a life of their own, regardless of – or sometimes directly because of – what alleged participants say. Santilli's version of events was (and continues to be) challenged from quite early on in the saga.

TV producer and stage magician Spyros Melaris has long claimed that he was the one responsible for the faked footage, and that

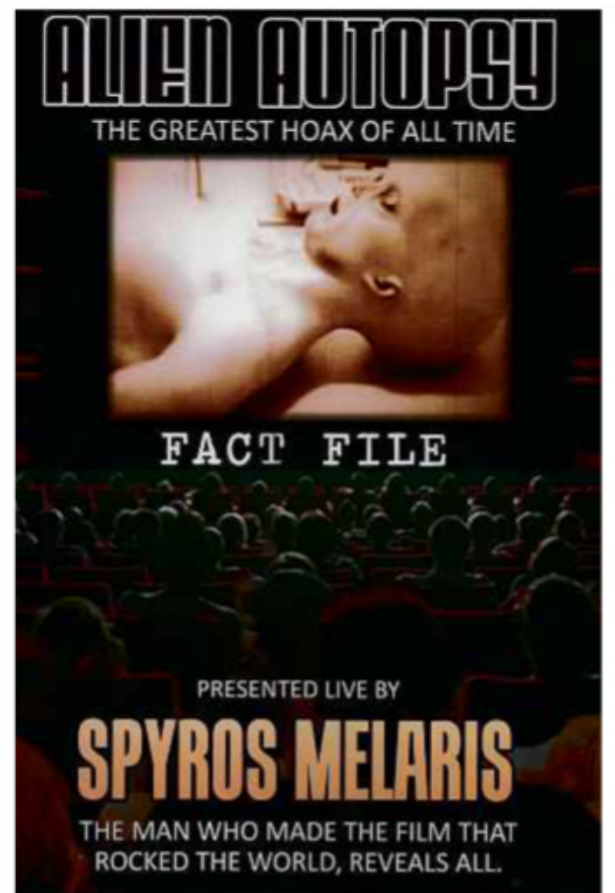
## The idea was to fake the footage, give it to TV channels, and then reveal the truth



Santilli's role was purely that of a promoter. According to Melaris, Santilli stood by his story of unusable footage, so the idea that was cooked up was to fake the footage, give (not sell) the film to TV channels around the world, create a buzz, and then reveal the

truth. In the UK, Channel 4 got it for free; but Melaris claims Santilli had sold the film on the quiet everywhere else – information that he kept to himself. Melaris also maintains he made all of the auxiliary footage, such as that of the aforementioned homeless man; he poured coffee in one end of him, put some better trousers on the other, and told him what to say.

Melaris has gone into some detail about the process of making the film, but – as with so much about this saga – there is no convincing proof beyond the anecdotal. Had he, while filming the fake footage, made a “making of” documentary, or kept the props he used, or even copies of the original film (as all of the preview footage had been transferred to video), this would prove the actual provenance of the footage once and for all. He says he has receipts for Fuji-stock film processed in 1995; but he was a TV producer when film was still in very common use (video being of relatively poor quality at the time), and the receipts could be for any project. Melaris has at least kept his story consistent, however, and is receptive to discussion, and his account is endorsed by Philip Mantle, who has spent more time and energy researching it than anyone else. Indeed, Mantle has said it will take Santilli producing the original filmstock to convince him otherwise, and in the absence of this he finds Melaris highly credible. <sup>8</sup>



**ABOVE LEFT:** Ray Santilli photographed in his London office by Philip Mantle in 1995. **ABOVE RIGHT:** In another version of events, Spyros Melaris claims he was the one responsible for “the film that rocked the world”.

What’s perhaps more surprising is that despite general acceptance (not least due to its promoter saying so) that the alien autopsy film is a fake, there are still a number of ufologists who regard it as real and therefore proof of extraterrestrial visitation. Some even insist the doubt and scepticism surrounding the film is part of a black op designed to discredit Santilli and cast doubt on what is, they believe, genuine film of an alien autopsy.

It goes full fractal from this point, and to pursue it down all of the subsequent rabbit-holes needs patience, a powerful torch and a large box of aspirin: not for nothing does Philip Mantle’s book about the saga<sup>9</sup> run to over 600 pages; and it’s a pretty focused account. Despite its initially straightforward appearance, the whole saga is so intricately convoluted that ultimately all you can really do is go with your gut. Is it real? Is it fake? Is it fake, but with real elements? Is it fake but based on real (but lost) footage? Twenty-five years, a mountain of claims, counter claims, discussions, rebuttals and a feature film later, the established facts remain few and far between – and in the absence of physical evidence, conflicting testimony is all we have.

In the quarter-century since it first surfaced, the Santilli film has been compared with most of the benchmark, image-based fortean artefacts: the aforementioned Zapruder footage, the Turin Shroud, the Patterson film. However, in many respects, the closest analogue to the whole saga is another British storm in a teacup – the Cottingley Fairies (see **FT356:30-35**). Eighty years previously, Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths had produced photographs that seemed to back up their claim that they

played with fairies. This was seized upon by (among others) Arthur Conan Doyle as proof not just of that particular incident but as evidence of the objective existence of fairies, full stop. The excitement the photos generate was rather greater than the children had expected; less partisan scrutiny inevitably followed, and finally Elsie and Frances admitted their fairies were actually pictures cut from a book, mounted on pins and photographed. Crucially, however, the girls maintained until their dying days that there *actually had been fairies*, which they had tried to photograph. One of the pictures was, in fact, genuine (they were unsure which), and, above all, their intentions had been pure: they wanted people to believe them. The Alien Autopsy film follows much the same trajectory: rumour of an incident, apparent visual proof, much brouhaha with authoritative voices weighing in, eventual admission that the footage was faked but, crucially, continuing insistence on the part of the central protagonist that *the actual incident was real*. Again, like Cottingley, it is generally agreed – with a few dissenting voices – to be a fake.

In retrospect, what’s most fascinating about the alien autopsy film is how quickly the story took off, how many people accepted it as presented, and how little in the way of critical thinking it was subjected to. The timing was absolutely central in this. It’s tempting to speculate that had the footage been released 10 years earlier, post *E.T.* and in the midst of the video nasty furore, then it would have been received less fervently and more probably dismissed as a stunt. As it was, in 1995 there was a mass audience primed and ready to accept pictures purportedly showing extraterrestrial beings who looked

much the ones they’d been seeing on *The X-Files* each week. The UFO community buzz about an imminent revelation had been growing steadily and entire shelves of WH Smith featured magazines of a paranormal bent. If there was ever a time to spend a coin in the penny arcade of forteana, Ray Santilli picked it to the second – and the jackpot duly poured out.

*With thanks to Willie Kay*

#### NOTES

**1** For Bob Rickard’s full account, see **FT81:42**. And for subsequent updates on the whole saga: **FT81-41-43, 82:32-36, 83:6, 84:29-33, 87:46, 85:52, 89:17, 132:47, 134:50-51, 202:30, 210:30-31, 213:58, 227:38-39**.

**2** *Secret History: The Roswell Incident*, Channel 4 Television, UK; first broadcast 28 Aug 1995.

**3** *Alien Autopsy: Fact or Fiction*, Fox, US; first broadcast 28 Aug 1995.

**4** Richard Corliss, “Autopsy or Fraud-topsy?”, *Time Magazine*, 27 Nov 1995.

**5** Michael Hesemann, “Alien Autopsy: Roswell or Socorro?”, *Nexus Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 6, Oct/Nov 1996.

**6** **FT210:30**.

**7** *Eamonn Investigates: Alien Autopsy*, British Sky Broadcasting, UK; first broadcast, 4 April 2006.

**8** *The One Show*, BBC TV; first broadcast 31 Oct 2018.

**9** Philip Mantle, *Roswell Alien Autopsy: The Truth Behind the Film That Shook the World*, Flying Disk Press, 2020.

♦ **STU NEVILLE** is a lifelong fortean, administrator of the Fortean Forums and an avid pursuer of the peculiar. When not embroiled in the weird he works for a training company. He believes/doesn’t believe in a wide range of things depending on how tired he is.

# ALIEN AUTOPSY

## THE INTERVIEW

**NIGEL WATSON** talks to ufologist and author Philip Mantle about his long search for the truth behind the Santilli film.

**NIGEL WATSON:** How did you get involved with the release of the *Alien Autopsy* film?

**PHILIP MANTLE:** In 1993 I was, among other things, the press officer for the British UFO Research Association (BUFORA) and a letter crossed my desk from a company called The Merlin Group. The letter was signed by the owner, Ray Santilli, and asked if BUFORA could assist in the making of a UFO documentary. I replied, and over the course of the next few months I had several conversations with Santilli, who eventually went on to tell me that he had actually obtained film of the UFO crash at Roswell in 1947 and the aliens being autopsied.

Naturally, I asked Santilli to show me the film he claimed to have. This, for a variety of reasons offered by Santilli, never happened; so I dismissed it as another tall tale. In early 1995 I was sent a review copy of the movie *Roswell* on a VHS tape and it reminded me of Santilli and his story; so I got him on the phone and asked if he still claimed to have this Roswell footage. He said he did. I asked again if I could see it, and this time I was asked to speak to his secretary and make an appointment to see him at his offices in London. This I did and, along with my wife, visited Ray Santilli in early 1995. He showed me several films, the first was called the 'tent footage', which was supposedly of one of the dead aliens at Roswell being examined in a field tent out in the New Mexico desert.

Over the next few weeks, we were shown two separate and different autopsy films. They were both filmed in the same room and the 'creature' was the same, but they showed different medical procedures. We were then shown what is called the 'debris film'. One of the other things I did for BUFORA at that time was act as their conference organiser. I already had a conference all set to go in August 1995 at Sheffield Hallam University, so, thinking on my feet, I believed that the best way to get to the bottom of this film was to get it into the public domain – what better way to do this than show it at our conference? I asked Santilli, he agreed, we shook hands, and that was that. Of course, a lot happened between our shaking hands in April 1995 and the showing of the film at Hallam University in August 1995; but Ray Santilli turned up,



**"All I had to do was keep digging and I would eventually get to the bottom of it"**



**LEFT:** A still from the *Alien Autopsy* film. **BELOW:** A younger Philip Mantle with one of the alleged canisters of original alien autopsy footage.

showed the film to a packed auditorium (two of them, in fact) and the next day it was shown on TV around the world.

**NW:** Did it seem convincing to you at first?

**PM:** The first piece of film that we were shown was the aforementioned 'tent footage', allegedly showing one of the dead aliens being examined before it was shipped off to wherever. The tent footage is in black and white with no soundtrack. The camera is fixed in one position and you see two men in white coats 'examining' the deceased alien which is lying on a slab and mostly covered – but you can see the head, hands and feet. The overall quality of the tent footage is pretty poor, as I had expected, and I wouldn't say it was convincing, but after waiting 18 months I could at least confirm that the film did exist. When we were later shown the two autopsies and the debris film I found them less credible, simply because of their clarity.

**NW:** When did you have your first doubts about its authenticity?

**PM:** Once the alien autopsy film was released on TV around the world in August 1995 and my 'plan' to get it into the public domain had indeed worked. I fully expected that before long someone would step forward with some information about the film, one way or another, but that did not happen. So, we looked to the various experts in a variety of professions to see if they could shine any light on what we were seeing on the TV screen. One such field, of course, was movie special effects.

A US company called 'The Really Dangerous Company' came forward with a report detailing minor 'errors' in the film. Their report showed you when and where to look while viewing the film and it pointed out a small number of minor discrepancies. It didn't prove the film was fake, but what it did was show those willing to look that all was not what it seemed. I knew now that all I had to do was keep digging and I would eventually get to

the bottom of it all. I told Ray Santilli to his face one day over lunch that I would find the answers, and he just smiled and said “Okay”.

**NW: In your book *Roswell Alien Autopsy* you note that most members of the medical profession said the procedures looked genuine. Were they looking at it from the wrong perspective?**

PM: I think it is fair to say that a lot of medical professionals were sure that the procedure carried out – the autopsy – was pretty much correct. Of course, none of them would comment on what the creature lying on the slab was. I’m not convinced they looked at it from the wrong perspective as, by and large, they were either asked by a TV company or a UFO researcher to comment only on the medical procedure, and that is what they did. You couldn’t, for example, ask them if this was the correct thing to do to an authentic alien creature, as none of them would have ever encountered such a scenario.

**NW: Which advice from experts was the most useful?**

PM: That’s difficult to say. The special effects guys all said they could make the same film – which you would expect them to say. The medical professionals were of the opinion that the autopsy procedure looked authentic with the right instruments being used and so on. We even contacted a group for ex-military combat photographers, one of whom said the film was hopeless, while another thought it was pretty good.

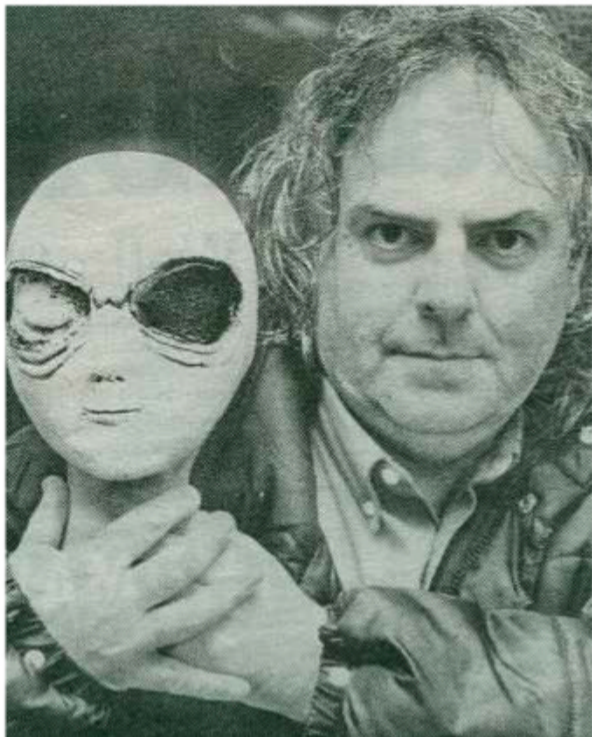
**NW: Which experts were most off-beam or mistaken? And why?**

PM: The main branch of experts that I found a big waste of time were those that specialised in languages. In the debris film, for example, on parts of the wreckage known as ‘I-beams’ there are a number of symbols. I sent copies of these to a variety of museums asking if

they could work out what these symbols were and what they said. Most of them had no idea what they were. Of course, I discovered much later that they were, in the main, Greek letters – so you have to ask why the experts couldn’t see that...

**NW: What did you think of the theory that the ‘alien’ was a human with genetic defects?**

PM: I don’t think this one ever got off the ground. There are two different autopsy films and the creatures in them are identical apart from the fact that the one released on TV has a damaged leg and the other one doesn’t.



You would have to have had *two* deformed humans, both looking exactly the same. No such deformity could be located anywhere in the medical literature. Plus, there’s the fact that every human born has a navel, and these two creatures didn’t. Therefore, it wasn’t human. End of theory!

**NW: The location where the film was shot is also disputed; was this another red herring?**

PM: There is no dispute about where the alien autopsy films (plural) were shot: it was in a flat in Camden in London.

**NW: What are the main factors that have kept ufologists going down so many avenues of research?**

PM: People simply want to believe. To some people, this film was like finding the Holy Grail. To others, it represents everything that is wrong with ufology.

**NW: How did you track down the people who made the tent footage and the better-quality films that followed?**

PM: The tent footage was exposed as fake thanks to a tip-off I received via email. A chap told me that he knew something about it. I spoke to him, he told me the story and I checked it out. He was right. The tent footage was made by a chap called Keith Bateman who at the time ran his own company called AK MUSIC. He’d had a fun ‘brain-storming’ session with some colleagues and Ray Santilli, during which Santilli said: “Wouldn’t it be great to have some Roswell footage.” Bateman took that idea and went to a farm in Bedfordshire and made the tent footage. Without it there would never have been any alien autopsy film.

The alien autopsy films and debris footage originated from a very different source. We had tracked down the chap who was alleged to have made the dummies for it and he told us that we should talk to someone called



KEITH BATEMAN

**TOP:** John Humphreys with an alien made for the 2006 *Alien Autopsy*. **CENTRE:** Keith Bateman, the man behind the ‘tent footage’, holding the fake alien head used in the film. **ABOVE LEFT:** Alien symbols in a still from the ‘debris’ film, allegedly shot at the saucer crash site. **ABOVE RIGHT:** A still from the ‘tent footage’.



PHILIP MANTLE

**ABOVE:** Spyros Melaris with two paintings from his storyboard for the alien autopsy film. **BELOW:** A film can label released by Ray Santilli, allegedly coming from the canisters that housed the original film.

'Spyros'. The man who made the dummies was UK sculptor John Humphreys, but he stopped talking and we were left in limbo. In 2006, I believe, my colleague Russell Callaghan was running his own magazine called *UFO DATA*. Out of the blue, he had a call from a man who claimed that he was the one behind the making of the alien autopsy film. That man was Spyros Melaris. Remember, we had been told by sculptor John Humphreys to speak to 'Spyros' – but Spyros who? Once I spoke with Spyros Melaris on the phone, I knew the game was up. He filled in all the blanks and there was little doubt that he was indeed the man who led the team that faked the alien autopsy films.

**NW: What do you think about the testimony of the mysterious 'missing' cameraman who, according to the story, had shot the original footage?**

PM: You know, Ray Santilli even arranged, at a planned date and time, to have a chap with an American accent phone me claiming *he* was the mysterious cameraman. It was nonsense, of course, just like his alleged testimony, but it is all part of the story. In the account released by Ray Santilli, the 'cameraman' claimed to have worked on a number of US military projects. Upon checking, all of those present at these projects were known and accounted for and there was no 'missing cameraman'.

**NW: What was the most frustrating part of your inquiry?**

**"There is no genuine footage. The alien autopsy films are 100 per cent fake"**



PM: The first thing is the length of time it took me to get to the bottom of it all – around 14 years in total. I know, don't say it! Maybe I was naïve, but once the film was shown on TV I was confident that it wouldn't take long before we had the answers in the bag. I couldn't have been more wrong. The second most frustrating thing is that, even today, there are people who believe that the film is authentic.

**NW: Did you ever think of giving up?**

PM: I never thought of giving up. The main reason for this was because it was a personal thing. For example, I was accused of all kinds of things back in 1995, including being Santilli's accomplice or being on his payroll. Ray Santilli *did* pay me a fee for working on the documentary he made and sold – in fact, I wrote it for him and it is narrated by actor Brian Blessed. That was the only thing Santilli paid me for. As for being his accomplice... well, what can I say?

**NW: Do you think Santilli actually has some genuine footage or stills he is holding back? If even a fraction of it is genuine – as he has claimed – why hasn't the US Government claimed ownership of it?**

PM: No, there is no genuine footage – none at all. There never was any in the first place. The alien autopsy films are all 100 per cent fake.

**NW: Have you got concrete evidence that all the footage was faked?**

PM: I have interviewed all of those involved, right from that very first meeting when Ray Santilli, jokingly I might add, said wouldn't it be nice to have some Roswell footage, all the way through to Spyros Melaris. Spyros didn't just tell me his side of the story; he backed it up by showing me the evidence at his home: his 1995 diaries, faxes from Kodak, drawings that he made, his fully-painted story board (he is a very talented artist), research files and much more. All of this is laid out in my book.



PHILIP MANTLE

**ABOVE:** Philip Mantle tells the story of his investigation in a new four-part film and a new and revised edition of his exhaustive book on the case.

**NW: Is there footage of Spyros actually shooting the fake footage, or any props that would back-up his claims?**

PM: Spyros has some footage of the debris film that was never used, and I have seen this. We have a Polaroid photo of sculptor John Humphreys making the dummies. Spyros has most of his own files from the time, but all of the props and dummies were destroyed after the filming, as per agreement.

**NW: Was it a CIA-promoted project as some suggest?**

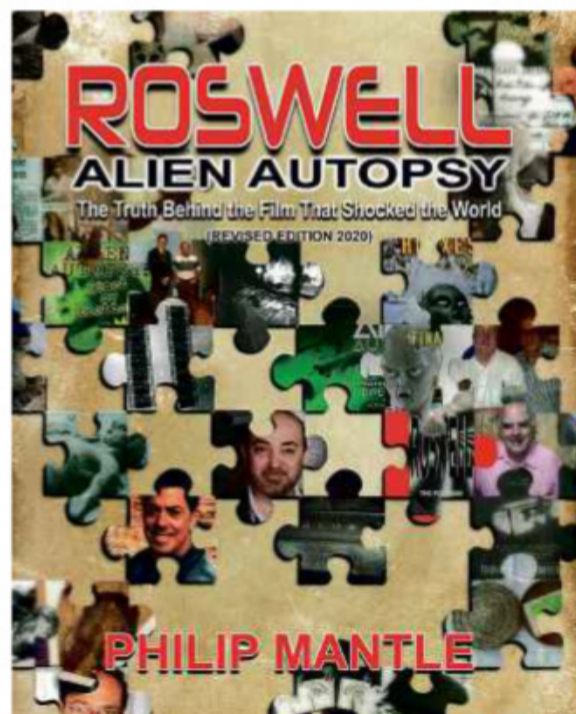
PM: This idea popped up last year but, no, the CIA was not involved. The genesis of the alien autopsy film was Keith Bateman. Keith is a lovely guy and was very amused when I told him about the CIA idea.

**NW: What are the stupidest theories you have heard?**

PM: The first is that it was a CIA fake. The next is that I was involved in faking it. The third is that the footage is out-takes from an unknown sci-fi movie.

**NW: Some people, like UFO researcher Grant Cameron and former CIA scientist Kit Green, say they saw or knew about the AA film before many years before Santilli got hold of it. Does this undermine the theory that all the footage was faked?**

PM: No, it doesn't. The fact is that no one went on the record before the film's release in 1995 stating that they had seen it previously. All of them, including Dr Christopher 'Kit' Green, went on the record after 1995.



**NW: What do you think accounts for the lasting appeal of this whole saga?**

PM: Whether you like it or not, the alien autopsy film is now firmly embedded in popular culture. Stills from it are regularly used by the news media when they make any reference to Roswell or UFOs in general. You still have a film, albeit a fake one. Most UFO sightings, of course, are in the form of oral accounts – and when it comes to UFOs, both the general public and ufologists love a bit of film.

**NW: Does this give us any lessons for future UFO research?**

PM: It should have done, but I doubt if it will. Take the Roswell slides fiasco of a couple of years back (see **FT326:26, 329:26-27**).

Those behind it seem to have used the same playbook as Ray Santilli, but UFO researchers got caught up in it and it was all a fake. Thousands of people paid money to see it too.

**NW: Looking back, would you have dealt with these claims differently?**

PM: It would be great if we all had the benefit of hindsight, wouldn't it? I still think that my original idea to get the film into the public domain was the right thing to do. No one, including Ray Santilli, knew how big the film would be. Originally, of course, there were no TV or publishing deals. Santilli's original idea was to release it on video as part of the documentary that I worked on for him. It was only when news of the film was accidentally released to the news media (by me) that TV became involved. In 1995, the film was seen by millions of TV viewers around the world. Was it unrealistic of me to believe that, as a result of this huge TV audience, someone would step forward with the information that we were all looking for?

Philip Mantle's new revised edition of *Roswell Alien Autopsy: The Truth Behind the Film That Shook the World* (Flying Disk Press, 2020) is available now from Amazon for £20.

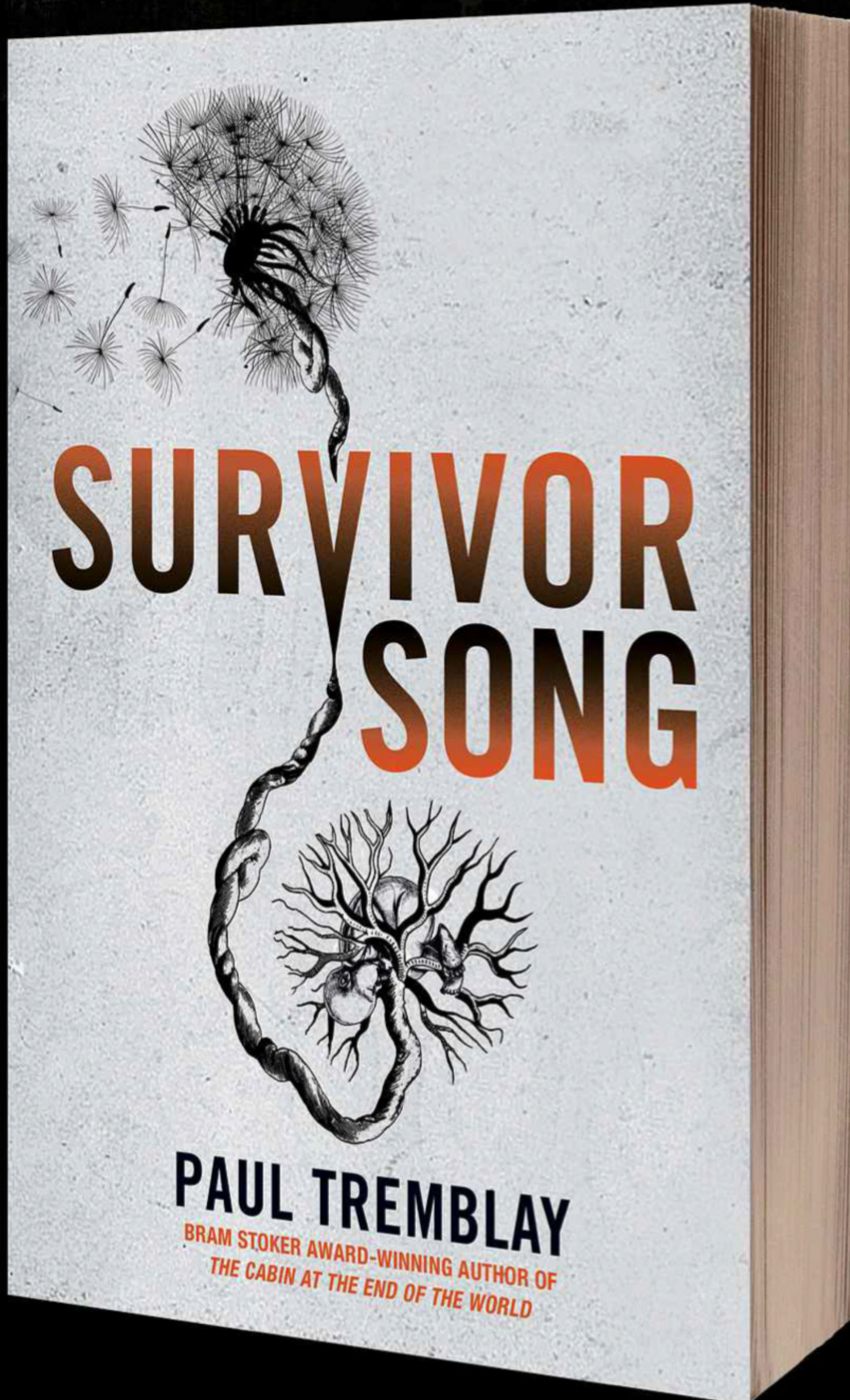
The story of Philip's investigation into the film is told in a new four-part documentary *Alien Autopsy: The Search for Answers*, available now on Amazon Prime and iTunes.

➡ **NIGEL WATSON** is the author of numerous books on the UFO phenomenon, including the recently published *Captured by Aliens* (McFarland, 2020), which examines alien abduction claims.

'SCARED THE LIVING HELL OUT OF ME,  
AND I'M PRETTY HARD TO SCARE'

**STEPHEN KING**

*ON A HEAD FULL OF GHOSTS*



# THE MAN WHO WOULD BE Q

**NOEL ROONEY** investigates the curious case of Austin Steinbart, a media-savvy young man who claims to be the mysterious Q – or at least a ‘baby’ version of the elusive, conspirasphere icon who has been receiving messages from his time-travelling future self...

**T**he history of strangeness is replete with examples of people who have claimed to be, in addition to or instead of the person they clearly were, someone else entirely.

If one were to take only two examples of psychic identity theft – Jesus and Elvis – the impostor count would be enormous, perhaps incalculable. There is a whole school of psychology devoted to the pathology underlying such claims, and occasionally the study of these extraordinary people has led in directions that are, in themselves, icons of high strangeness.

In 1964, Milton Rokeach, a Polish-American social psychologist, published a book called *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*, a study of what happened when he took three paranoid schizophrenics who all believed they were the incarnation of Jesus, and brought them together.<sup>1</sup> This was not the first attempt to corral people with similar delusions, though it is certainly the most famous; Rokeach was, in fact, inspired to conduct the experiment by an article in Harper’s magazine, describing how two women who both believed they were the Virgin Mary were roomed together, and one of them was cured of her delusion as a result.

It’s perhaps understandable – if passing strange – that someone should lay claim to the identity of a dead, or legendary, person. Things get decidedly odder when someone claims the identity of another person who is still alive. This is a gambit fraught with personal danger; the risk of rebuttal is high, and the risk of ridicule equally so, if not greater. But a saving feature of this variety of imposition is that, often, the object identity is in some way occulted. One could argue this reveals a counter-intuitive streak of pragmatism in the otherwise, on the face of it, mad urge to claim one is in fact someone else.

There is a whole sub-category of identity claims linked to famous criminals. Perhaps



## He is ‘Baby Q’, the recipient of messages from his own future avatar

the most famous, for a UK audience at least, is Wearside Jack. In the late 1970s, the north of England was in a state of fear and panic caused by the gruesome killing spree of Peter Sutcliffe, the man who came to be known as the Yorkshire Ripper. Sutcliffe murdered 13 women, and brutally attacked seven others, in the five years between 1976 and 1981, in West Yorkshire and Manchester.

In 1979, the hunt for the Ripper was thrown tragically off course when an audio recording, and a series of letters, claiming to be from the murderer, were received by the police. The man who sent the tape and letters, and who went under the pseudonym of Wearside Jack, claimed he

LEFT: Austin Steinbart: Q insider? Or Q himself?

was the Yorkshire Ripper, and his ruse was sufficiently credible to lead the police away from Sutcliffe, and allow him to attack and kill several unfortunate women who might otherwise have been spared the attentions of the cruel psychopath. Wearside Jack was not identified until nearly 25 years later, in 2006; he was sentenced to eight years in prison where he spent the time, one imagines, fervently wishing he really was someone else.

Another phenomenon one might loosely ascribe to the category of impostor is the claim to be a time traveller, more often from the future, but occasionally from the past. Many of these stories have turned out to be urban legends, hoaxes or transpositions from works of fiction, but occasionally they can be connected to an actual person. I suspect most fortune tellers will have their favourites among this select group of time-bending luminaries; I’m personally rather fond of the John Titor hoax from early this century (FT240:46-52).

Posts relating to Titor, supposedly a soldier transported here from the year 2036, first appeared on an online forum called The Time Travel Institute, offering forum members some tantalising, and frustratingly partial, technical specifications for time machines. Titor later made a series of predictions, some of them highly specific, including a civil war that would erupt in the USA between 2004 and 2008, and would result in the country splitting into five independent states. He also predicted World War III, a brief but deadly nuclear war in 2015 in which upwards of two billion people would die. Titor was quite popular among time travel fans until his predictions proved to be incorrect, and eventually investigations suggested he was the prank brainchild of two brothers: Larry Haber, a lawyer from Florida, and his computer scientist sibling Morey.

“It would be curious and uncanny,” to



LEFT: Trump supporters sporting Q T-shirts; not all are convinced by Steinbart's claims. BELOW: Steinbart has claimed that he previously worked for the Defense Intelligence Agency.

quote the late, great Jake Thackray,<sup>2</sup> if someone were to compound these two categories of strange behaviour: to claim both to be someone else, and to claim that they came from, or received their information from, the future. To put themselves forward as an occulted, but presumably real, person in the contemporary world, and at the same time pretend to have access to future knowledge that somehow both verified their identity, and offered insights and truths to those who had ears to hear.

### DÉJÀ Q

Enter Austin Steinbart: Steinbart, a sparky, tech- and media-savvy young man from Chandler, Arizona, has hovered around the conservative edge of the Republican Party for some years; in fact, he has been around the GOP scene for so long that it's hard to credit that he is only 29 years old. He has been posting content on YouTube and similar outlets since at least 2014, but in the last year the nature of that content has changed significantly. At first, it was concerned with aspects of conservative activism, and eccentric views of the American political landscape. Then, late last year, it began to focus more and more on conspiracy theory in general and in particular on QAnon, the web of conspiracy theories that has built up around the gnomish 4-Chan, and later 8-Chan, postings of an unknown individual who signs the posts (known as 'Q drops') as Q, Q Patriot, or Q clearance patriot (for the full background to QAnon, see FT371:32-39).<sup>3</sup>

Steinbart's apparent obsession with Q came to a head in January and February of this year, when he shifted from identifying as a QAnoner, or at times a Q-proofer (those

who interpret 'Q drops' in the light of seemingly synchronous real-world events), to hints that he was a Q insider; this included the claim that he was in charge of a digital arm of the Trump presidential election campaign in 2016, specifically targeting 'socialists' and black voters and sending them information on Hillary Clinton that dissuaded them from voting for her, and thus winning the election by voter omission. But in a YouTube video in February, he advanced his claim even further, and finally said what he had in some ways been hinting at for weeks: "I am Q".

A common feature of narratives claiming extraordinary experiences, or identities, is development over time. A simple bold statement – "I was abducted by aliens"; "I came here from

the year 2025"; "I am in fact person X" – undergoes a process of elaborative development. Details emerge, some giving weight to the original claim, some branching off in tangents of the imagination. The trajectory of elaborative development is two-fold: first, it adds complexity to the narrative, colours it in and provides depth and perspective; second, it accelerates the boldness of the claim, and often either offers evidence or proof, or issues a challenge to detractors, and this process of challenge often becomes provocative.

Austin Steinbart's evolving narrative follows this classic trajectory. It has deepened and broadened, from the rather bald notion that he is Q, to the idea that he is in fact 'Baby Q', the recipient of messages from his own future avatar, Q+ (a confusing name, this, as occasionally in the Q posts this nomenclature is a signifier for Donald Trump), who, some 40 years in the future, is now the commander of the US Space Force, and is using new developments in quantum computing to send messages back through time to his younger self, and to the wider QAnon community.

At the same time, Steinbart's narrative of his past, and his family history, has been elaborated considerably. He was recruited by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) while still at high school, apparently because he had revealed a student demonstration as a PSYOP, or psychological operation. When he was still only 17 years old, the DIA sent him to Cuba, where he posed as a Christian missionary and came into contact with a Cuban computer boffin who was closely linked to Cuba's president (presumably Miguel Díaz-Canel, though he is never explicitly named). The DIA gave Steinbart command of all its black ops, which he now funds from his own pocket, supported by the immense wealth he generated by



early investment in Bitcoin. His great-grandfather was a Nazi SS officer, who was rescued from Russia as part of Operation Paperclip<sup>4</sup> and spirited away to the USA; his grandmother was a refugee from El Salvador who changed her identity when she married his grandfather, and became the first person to successfully sue the Catholic Church for child abuse. And he occasionally hinted at being related by blood to European royalty: a particularly odd claim, given that European royalty is the principal villain in his core narrative.

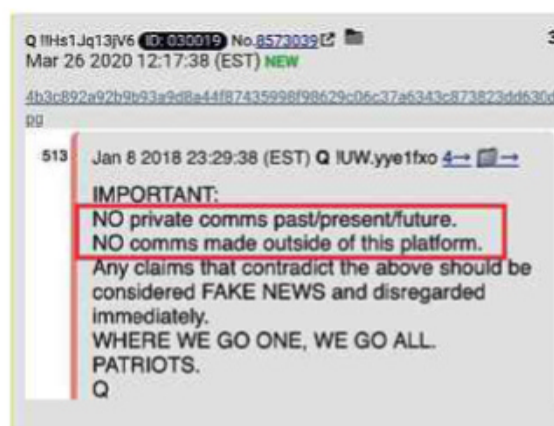
At the same time, he embarked on the second tangent of the elaborative development process; his claims became grander, and he began to make provocative predictions and statements that, he said, should get him arrested, except that, as a DIA agent, he was immune to prosecution. He posted a video of him buying a gun, which he then lovingly presented to his audience, along with an explosive he said he was setting around his house to eliminate unwary attackers. The dial was steadily inching into the red zone.

In March, Steinbart went to an Arizona clinic for a brain scan, apparently persuaded, or ordered, to do so by his parents. At the clinic he took photos of the medical records of a couple of American Football players, and posted them online. That tipped the balance; his claimed DIA immunity was not enough to prevent his arrest by the FBI, who duly turned up at his door (having apparently avoided his explosive traps) to be greeted by an armed Austin Steinbart who, luckily for all concerned, gave up without a struggle. [5] He has subsequently been re-arrested, and is now facing a number of charges relating to the publication of confidential material (none of it security related, despite Steinbart saying he would publish classified information). With legal action pending, he is still posting video content, and his narrative is still expanding.

There is a curious strain of fictional reference in Steinbart's YouTube performances; one which a psychologist might interpret as a subconscious streak of confessional subversion. When he explains, in his rambling monologues, a technical topic, such as quantum computing, or how UFOs are actually US Space Force vessels travelling in time, he often uses an analogy from a movie or video game. At one point, describing his career to date, he says that he feels as if he is in a giant game of *Grand Theft Auto*. It's as if there is a part of Austin Steinbart, of Baby Q, that wants someone to call him out as a liar, as a purveyor of fiction: to rescue him from the out of control game of *GTA* that his life has become.

## TRUE Q

When Steinbart claimed that he was Q, heads, hands and hackles were raised all over the conspiracy world. No one – at least, no one with any real exposure in the attention economy of the alt-right – had



until then come forward and said they were Q; plenty of people said they had invented Q, usually as a creative shit-post or a hoax to make the alt-right look stupid, [6] but there were no pretenders to the throne of the alt-right's principal prophet. Since then, a lot of online time and energy has been expended by supporters and detractors alike, arguing the merits of Steinbart's case. He has attracted some limited support from the QAnon community; his YouTube channel has over 20,000 subscribers and, initially at least, a fair number of people were prepared to give his claims a hearing.

This is perhaps not surprising. QAnon is, in some respects, nothing more than the most popular articulation of a trend that has accelerated in the Conspirasphere in recent years: an automatic disbelief in anything said by government (except for Trump himself who, despite a growing number of detractors, still commands reverential respect on the alt-right) coupled with a predisposition to believe quite extraordinary statements and claims made by opponents of the official line, often without any attempt at factual evidence. This double response has become a default mode for many on the alt-right, and in the Conspirasphere in general: automatic dissidence is the obverse face of a coin whose flipside is a willingness to believe some very strange things without question; a yearning for an alternative story that looks, for all the world, like a particularly desperate form of gullibility.

But his QAnon supporters are in the minority. As his claims have evolved, Steinbart has become the target of vitriolic and contemptuous rebuttals from a large number of commentators. The anti-Steinbart camp focuses on several aspects of his

LEFT: The 'No outside comms' Q drop. BELOW: Steinbart, despite pending legal action, continues to post YouTube videos.

narrative; but not, oddly, on discussion of his mental health, even though his YouTube performances have grown increasingly outlandish. Instead, they see him as a shill, a LARP, or in some cases merely an opportunist trying to profit from the QAnon bandwagon (this accusation tends to come from people who themselves profit from Q-related activities); and his claim to being a DIA agent has, ironically, left him open to the accusation that he is part of a Deep State PSYOP to discredit the real Q.

A number of Q supporters have pointed out that Steinbart could very easily clear up the whole mess by simply posting something that verifies his claim on 8-Chan, under the Q account. This is the acid test of authenticity for many. The slogan 'No outside comms' is part of the core vocabulary of QAnon, reflecting Q's assertion that the Q drops on 8-Chan are the only true messages. Occasional Q drops have emphasised this: "NO private comms past/present/future; NO comms made outside of this platform". The very idea that someone should go public and parade their credentials, with or without extraordinary additional claims, is anathema to the faithful. Q is an occult figure, an insider, a secret apostle hidden in the core of the Trump bastion; exposure would fatally undermine the project. In a sense, Q cannot be anyone, real or otherwise; s/he is far too important for that.

In another time, Austin Steinbart and his extraordinary claims would have been confined to the absolute margins: of society, of public attention, of the bandwidth of sanity. But we live at a time when rumour trumps fact, when 'it could be' is more comforting than 'it is' for many people, and not just those addicted to the vein of conspiracy theory that some commentators dub 'hope porn'. He has, albeit temporarily perhaps, found a niche in the ecology of wild belief; and by doing so he has shown us, if only by mad analogy, how domesticated our beliefs have become.

## NOTES

1 *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*, by Milton Rokeach, Alfred A Knopf, 1964

2 'Brother Gorilla', *Bantam Cock*, EMI, 1972

3 A selection of Steinbart's QAnon-related videos can be found at <https://wakefromyoursleep.com/>

4 [www.history.com/news/what-was-operation-paperclip](http://www.history.com/news/what-was-operation-paperclip)

5 The full story of Steinbart's arrest can be found at <https://www.newsbreak.com/news/OOgdN4ZA/baby-qanon-was-just-arrested>

6 Here is a good blog on the fine art of the shit-post and the history of QAnon at Forbidden Knowledge: <https://conta.cc/2Yya49b>

◆ NOEL ROONEY is a poet and longstanding forteen. He writes FT's regular 'Conspirasphere' column.



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# ERWIN SAUNDERS

## PIXIE HUNTER

Has a genially bumbling “ethereologist” captured conclusive evidence of England’s fairy folk in a series of quietly-uploaded YouTube videos? Or is the whole thing merely a delightfully eccentric waltz up the woodland path? **BOB FISCHER** loses himself in the gently beguiling world of Erwin Saunders...



ABOVE: Erwin Saunders examines the Morsu Pixie ‘Temple’. BELOW: Erwin seen in a 2017 video.

It’s a beautiful, sun-dappled day and, in a thicket of dense woodland, an extravagantly bearded man in a camouflage hat is nervously explaining his 25-year hobby of tracking and cataloguing “wilderness folk”, in particular the “Morsu Pixies”. This – apparently – is Erwin Saunders and, over the course of 17 YouTube videos uploaded between September 2017 and July 2019, he has created a beautifully immersive world of rustic strangeness and eccentricity. Or, perhaps, proved conclusively the existence of mercurial fairy folk in remote areas of English woodland. Consult your own sense of credulity and delete as applicable.

The Morsu, explains Erwin in this opening video, are about 10in (25cm) tall, with greyish skin. Pottering around a woodland cave entrance, he finds a tiny, discarded “hooker stick” used by the Little People (as he never calls them) to collect berries and mushrooms; this latter delicacy not only providing food

for our native pixies but also the basis for their ointments and medicines. Erwin, who has a likeably hesitant and bumbling manner, gets a bit out of breath and loses his hat. He namechecks “Tom, the chap who’s helping me upload all of this”, and Tom remains a



perpetually referenced but always unseen presence throughout all 17 short films. We don’t, at any point in this opening video, see an actual pixie. That happens in the next instalment.

### THE COMING OF THE PIXIES

I was first alerted to Erwin’s work by Jim Jupp, co-founder of the Ghost Box record label,<sup>1</sup> whose releases form a pivotal part of the Haunted Generation oeuvre (see FT354:30-37). Jim had stumbled upon Erwin’s YouTube channel while searching for “fairy sightings” as part of his research for a future music video. “Have you come across this before?” he asked me. “Surely *Fortean Times* folk would know about this? I’m sure he must be a professional actor, and this is a between-jobs project...” To my shame, Erwin’s adventures were entirely new to me, but I quickly became entranced by the gloriously low-octane nature of his quest.



ABOVE: A pixie caught on camera. BELOW: 'I won't be around for a couple of days or so...' Erwin in the mystery village, immediately before a six-month hiatus

In the second video, accurately entitled 'First Sighting of a Pixie' and uploaded on 30 September 2017, we get a fleeting money shot. Making a popping noise with his tongue to imitate the sound of drums ("They'll be curious"), Erwin is rewarded with the presence of a "scout" pixie who appears on the ridge of a towering rock formation, peering nervously down at our host and his camera. The creature is indeed a small, grey humanoid figure exhibiting skittish, meerkat-like movements. If – as we should probably assume – it's CGI, then it's very convincing. Erwin is predictably excited, and leaves bait around the site to encourage further sightings. These include cabbage and courgette seeds from his local garden centre, and – hilariously – Flying Saucer sweets. "They go mad for the sherbet," he explains.

None of these strange vignettes are presented with tongue remotely lodged in cheek. There are no in-jokes, no winks to camera, no intimation that Erwin and his pixies are anything but real. In fact, at no point does Erwin even suggest that he considers his hobby to be at all unusual. The videos are presented as entirely matter-of-fact, as though the existence of pixies is an accepted part of everyday British life, and he approaches his subject as though he were gently staking out a badger set for *Springwatch*. The only hint that he might be somewhat bashful about this curious quest comes in the very final video, in which an unseen female walker stumbles upon Erwin and is heard posing the immortal question: "Why are you filming yourself shooting leaves?"

Erwin, who has been idly pinging toy Nerf gun pellets into the undergrowth, looks flustered. "It's a wildlife thing," he stammers. "Just for fun, really." Which is as fair a sum-

## "IT'S A WILDLIFE THING," ERWIN STAMMERS. "JUST FOR FUN, REALLY"

mation of the whole 22-month escapade as any other.

In the intervening videos, we follow Erwin on... well, not so much a roller-coaster ride of fairy investigation, more a gentle merry-go-round. In the third and fourth instalments, there are further fleeting pixie sightings. Hilariously, Erwin's sandwich is stolen, and

we see it being dragged into a small cave by one of the bolder Morsu. "They're complete kleptomaniacs," he sighs, before revealing further tantalising details of pixie culture. They make hats and jewellery from bird skulls and claws, use slug skins for carrying water, and the "Morsu" monicker is one that Erwin has coined himself, from the Latin *magnum morsu*, which he roughly translates as "large teeth". In the fifth video, "Morsu Pixie Temple", we are shown an elaborately carved mini-ziggurat in the woods, and in the eighth instalment Erwin finds tiny but elaborate walkways strung between the trees.

We have to wait until the 12th video, "Searching for Wiltons Pixies", for our clearest sighting of the fairy folk at work. In a "flashback" sequence from what purports to be an older VHS recording, we see one rather cheeky-faced imp sporting a tiny backpack of



collected pebbles that he lobs – not entirely successfully – to his comrade on an adjacent boulder, while a third member of the tribe lurks on the ground to collect the fallen detritus. And in the penultimate video, “A New Faery Species”, events take a strangely unsettling turn. Erwin ventures into a dark, forbidding cave entrance, and is startled by what he calls a “wurm” – a large, four-legged, lizard-like creature – scuttling rapidly towards him. He is clearly scared, and so are we. It’s the one fleeting occasion on which the films become genuinely disquieting.

## WHO IS ERWIN SAUNDERS?

So we come to the great mystery (aside from the actual nature of the fairy folk themselves, obviously): who is Erwin? If we assume that he’s a fictional character, then the acting is of an incredibly high standard. He blusters, stammers, gets excited and frustrated, and – despite plenty of lengthy one-take monologues to camera – never once breaks character. With his features largely hidden behind a mass of luxuriant silver hair and beard, usually accompanied by a hat and spectacles, he ostensibly appears to be a man in his 50s... but the occasional close-up sometimes seems to betray a younger-looking complexion. At the end of the opening film, another VHS recording supposedly dating from 2009 is incorporated into the footage, showing a leaner-looking Erwin with a darker, shorter beard.

The relationship with “Tom” seems pivotal, too. Spoken of in the fifth video as a “young film-maker”, Tom exerts a sometimes fractious influence on his older colleague, and Erwin occasionally speaks wearily of his accomplice’s desire for more ambitious shots and, indeed, Internet recognition. “Like and subscribe,” Erwin reluctantly urges viewers at the end of later films, with the disclaimer that this swerve towards the corporate is entirely Tom’s idea, and that it makes him distinctly uncomfortable. Nevertheless, Tom’s input has a noticeable effect on the evolution of the films. While the earlier videos are charmingly clunky, with rough edits and distorted sound, later instalments have a glossy, professional sheen: there are expertly-framed linking shots of the woodland flora, and the surprise addition of wistful instrumental music. They’re like *Detectorists* with a soupçon of *Country File*. And pixies, obviously.

The locations are never identified. Some of the films feature woodland with some very distinctive rock formations, and a handful of friends have – without prompting – suggested these resemble the landscape of Alderley Edge in Cheshire. This is a locale that, appropriately, plays host to the magical folkloric escapades of Alan Garner’s books, with *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1960) in particular featuring small, grey, goblin-like creatures emerging into the woods from an underground cave system (see **FT336:40-42** for more on Garner and Alderley Edge).



The first nine videos, all seemingly shot in the same area of woodland, were uploaded between 29 September and 17 October 2017 and culminate in Erwin standing beside a duckpond in an idyllic village location, explaining that he “won’t be around for a couple of days or so” because he’s visiting London to discuss tactics with Tom.

A six-month gap ensues. The next video dates from 9 April 2018, with Erwin in what initially appears to be a different bit of woodland. He suggests that illness, disillusionment with his lack of YouTube views, and a “squabble” with Tom are the reasons for the hiatus. It’s another month before the next update, on 14 May 2018, and then there’s a further 10-month gap until the final run of six films, all uploaded between 25 March and 10 July 2019.

In the very last instalment, Erwin seems troubled, distracted and dispirited. Alarmingly, he frantically crops his beard on camera, roughly removing huge chunks of facial hair while claiming to have been shot in the neck by a poisoned pixie arrow with hallucinogenic properties. And ultimately, following the aforementioned Nerf Gun encounter, he professes to be “bored”, and wanders into the woods. And that, so far, is that.

**LEFT:** The younger-looking Erwin, supposedly seen in 2009. **BELOW LEFT:** The Morsu Pixies’ ‘hooker stick’ for collecting mushrooms and berries.

## MYSTERIES AND THEORIES

The entire escapade is shrouded in enigma. Jim Jupp suggests that Erwin’s films might form part of a viral publicity campaign for a forthcoming film or TV series, which seems plausible, although the extended time-frame involved arguably makes this unlikely. Personally, I like to think they’re merely the product of at least one restlessly creative mind deciding to have some fun on YouTube. Meanwhile, comments left on the videos suggest that a section of Erwin’s fanbase buy wholesale into the quest, and have enjoyed their own experiences with the fairy folk. “When I was a child I remember making a fairy house,” remarks one viewer, beneath the second of Erwin’s films. “One day I caught one in it. It was transparent and sliver [sic] and when it saw me it looked at me and then flew away. Sometimes I think I just made it up but then I watch these type of videos and rethink.” Others are keen to share tales of similar encounters.

One potential clue: Jim points me to a thread on the *Rogue Nation* Internet forum,<sup>2</sup> where one contributor discloses that Maggie Shayne’s 1994 fantasy novel *Miranda’s Viking* features a fictional character called ‘Professor Erwin Saunders’, and another called ‘Jeff Morsi’. But aside from this discussion, the original YouTube videos and the odd stray Facebook post, Google brings up precisely nothing about “our” Erwin and his quest. I’ve shared the videos on social media, and asked friends from both the folkloric and artistic communities if they recognise him, but have received only a succession of virtual blank stares... amid, it has to be said, a welter of praise for his work. My rogue theory is that “young film-maker” Tom is actually the real identity of Erwin, thus providing the ultimate “hidden in plain sight” in-joke, but my evidence for this is nothing more than the cynical hunch of a world-weary old soak.

The most exciting possibility, of course, is that Erwin and his pixies are entirely real. I’d certainly be delighted to hear any evidence from anyone subscribing to any of the above theories. Or, indeed, from Erwin himself. In the meantime, search for “Erwin Saunders” on YouTube and immerse yourself in the slowly-unfolding strangeness of this gentle genius at work.

### NOTES:

**1** Visit [www.ghostbox.co.uk](http://www.ghostbox.co.uk) to explore this musical parallel world.

**2** [www.rogue-nation3.com/showthread.php?tid=3292](http://www.rogue-nation3.com/showthread.php?tid=3292)

👉 **BOB FISCHER** is the writer of FT’s Haunted Generation column, a BBC radio presenter, and an enthusiast of folklore, strange music and retro pop culture. He blogs at [www.hauntedgeneration.co.uk](http://www.hauntedgeneration.co.uk), and tweets @bob\_fischer.

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## BRAZIL NUTS IN A CHINA CRISIS

In the first of two trips down the Amazon, **SD TUCKER** enters the Pythonesque realm of Brazilian politics, where the government's distinctly lax coronavirus response seems to prove that their plain-speaking President is not really the Messiah, as some claim, but a very naughty boy.

**T**he World Health Organisation (WHO) has received much criticism for its handling of the coronavirus pandemic, some of it justified. Less justified was a tweet put out by Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro at the end of April, refusing to follow WHO guidelines on the basis that they were all basically just a bunch of paedophiles in scrubs: "This is the World Health Organisation whose advice on coronavirus some people want me to follow? Should we follow their [sexual] education policy guidelines too? For children zero to four years old: satisfaction and pleasure when touching their bodies, masturbation... For children four to six years old: a positive gender identity [i.e. becoming transgender] ... masturbation in early childhood, same-sex relations... Nine to 12 years old: first sexual experience [with another]." The WHO advocate no such things, of course, but what they *do* currently urge are a whole raft of social-distancing measures to combat Covid-19, some of which would have a negative effect on the Brazilian economy if implemented. Known as 'The Tropical Trump' due to his gift for outspoken language, Bolsonaro has openly declared his "love" for the US President (but not in a gay way, as per WHO advice), and places a similar emphasis to The Donald upon his wish to make business boom. As such, by undermining the WHO, Bolsonaro could simultaneously undermine those regional governors in places like São Paulo and Rio who have over-ruled his economic concerns in favour of lockdowns. 'BRAZIL CANNOT CLOSE!' has become the new slogan of his *Bolsonarista* legions... the trouble is, large parts of the country have already done so.

Bolsonaro's financial concerns are valid. The correct balance between health and wealth is almost impossible to find – so he has taken to subjecting anyone who disagrees with his own chosen path to vicious personal attack, in classic Trumpian fashion. He forced his Health Minister into a "consensual divorce" from his job for backing WHO-approved social-distancing guidelines, accused a rival of creating a "dictatorship" for closing down Rio's beaches, and charged the *Washington Post* with publishing phony fake-news photos of graves being dug across the country.



ANDRE COELHO / GETTY IMAGES

### “AT THE WORST IT WILL BE LIKE A LITTLE FLU OR A BIT OF A COLD”



**ABOVE:** Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, struggling to grasp the implications of the coronavirus situation. **BELOW:** Foreign Minister Ernesto Araujo suggests people should only have a poo every two days.

Currently, Brazil is the worst-affected South American nation in terms of Covid-19 deaths, but Bolsonaro's attitude appears unsympathetic. "So what?" he asked when faced with a then-record 474 fatalities in one day. "I'm sorry. What do you want me to do?" The President's middle name is actually 'Messiah' – "but I can't work miracles," he said. As at Lourdes, the streams and gutters of the nation's many *favelas* may be able to work acts of miracle-healing, though. Bolsonaro has argued that, due to their constant exposure to effluent, his countrymen may have evolved special antibodies which make them immune to illness: "Brazilians need to be studied. They never catch anything. You see some bloke jumping into the sewage, he gets out... right? And nothing happens to him. I think it's even possible lots of people have already been infected in Brazil, a few weeks or months ago, and have already got the antibodies to help it not proliferate."

Swimming up shit creek was clearly an excellent way to keep fit, with exercise being the best prophylactic of all: "In my particular case, because of my background

as an athlete [in the military], I wouldn't need to worry if I was infected by the virus. I wouldn't feel anything, or at the very worst it would be like a little flu or a bit of a cold." Organising mass rallies in spite of his own recent brush with death following a stabbing by a leftist loon during his successful 2018 election campaign, the oft-hospitalised Bolsonaro feels fear of Covid-19 is irrational "hysteria", urging people to "face the virus like men, not kids" and carry on life as normal. You can tell he's an ex-army officer, and his use of barrack-room language has become legendary. Past gems include: "I'm in favour of torture, you know"; "A policeman that doesn't kill isn't a policeman"; "If a homosexual couple come to live next door to me, it will devalue my home!"; "I had four men [children] and on the fifth, I had a moment of weakness, and a woman came out [of my balls]"; and, to a political opponent who had just libelled him as a rapist, "I'm a rapist now? I would never rape *you*, because you do not deserve it... Slut!"

Is there method to the Messiah's madness? Maybe. By continually arguing against his rivals' lockdowns, he acts as if trapped by the political Establishment, of which, like Trump, he is not a traditional part. Thus, if the economy does tank, he can blame others. Yet, if lives are saved, he can argue it was just hysteria after all, or cynically take credit for it – he is the President, you know. Even his slandering of the WHO as child-corrupters makes political sense, as it plays to a core evangelical voter-base. "God is Brazilian," Bolsonaro has proclaimed. "The cure [for Covid-19] is right there." God can definitely provide miracle-cures: Bolsonaro has said that "He saved my life" after the stabbing, "then He gave me that mandate" to rescue the land from the 30-plus years of fiscally corrupt quasi-Marxist rule that followed the end of Brazil's right-wing military *junta* in 1985. This was divine repayment for the fact that in 2016, shortly after deciding to run for President, the staunch Catholic Bolsonaro had, with perfect timing, been re-baptised in the River Jordan; maybe some passing floaters are what made him immune to infection.

On 3 April, Bolsonaro called for a national day of fasting to "save Brazil from this evil" of coronavirus, but to many evangelicals, such as pastor and congressman Marco Feliciano, the evils of Covid-19 and Marxism are twin spores of the same Satanic viral-load. "Brazil is in a serious crisis," Feliciano wrote on Twitter. "The forces of evil are rising against a God-fearing Christian President and family-defender." The basic idea is that if you allow ill-disguised Marxist multinationalists like the WHO to start running your public health service in response to a fake 'Plandemic', before long they'll begin using this as a front to convert



ABOVE: The Temple of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in São Paulo. The movement was founded by Brazilian religious leader Edir Macedo in 1977 and the megachurch was built as a replica of Solomon's Temple.

your kids with "gay-kits" in Sex-Ed classes. Bolsonaro is strongly allied with prominent televangelists, who in return get lots of government ad-buys on their TV channels, as well as the favour of seeing the Messiah go to court to ensure their packed mega-churches remain exempt from lockdown as "essential services". One such figure, Pastor Edir Macedo, anointed Bolsonaro during a service held within his Church's temple in São Paulo. Macedo preaches a gospel of 'prosperity theology' – that God is a free-market Thatcherite, who thinks, like Bolsonaro, that the welfare state is an abomination in the eyes of the Lord. Another televangelist *Bolsonarista*, Pastor Silas Malafaia, has called social-distancing a "second-rate quarantine", thus echoing the President's desire to keep everywhere open... especially the mega-churches.<sup>1</sup>

## MINISTRY OF SILLY TALKS

A successful President needs allies in cabinet as well as the confessional – real men like Ernesto Araujo, Brazil's Foreign Minister, who also holds outspoken opinions on Covid-19, as expressed in his regular personal blog, 'Metapolitics-17 – Against Globalism', which he argues is an "anti-human and anti-Christian system". If such a blog were to be maintained by a cabinet minister in a Western European country, he would be immediately sacked; for one thing, it is actually interesting. For another, it claims there is a sinister globalist plot to make the human race go gay in the name of Gaia – if we don't produce babies, our ailing planet will eventually be saved from mankind's heavy burden. Bolsonaro himself is notoriously sceptical of climate change, allowing more logging in the Amazon

rainforest and then asking his countrymen to compensate by allowing fewer logs to emerge from their eco-friendly anuses in return. "It's enough to poop every other day," rather than seven days a week, he has said. "That will be better for the whole world." Pooping less means you must have eaten less, Bolsonaro implied, and eating less would lead to a reduction in carbon dioxide originating from agriculture as fewer crops would need to be grown, thereby offsetting the loss of chopped-down carbon-absorbing rainforest. But as many trees are being removed to make space for *further* farmland at the behest of Bolsonaro's friends in big agro-business, some may think this argument is itself a pile of crap.

While not denying the basic fact of climate change, it has been argued that many left-wing activists over-amplify the prospect of looming Apocalypse as a means to promote a general anti-capitalist agenda, with their demands to destroy entire economies in the name of the planet likely to do more harm to humanity than rising sea levels. Yet Foreign Minister Araujo goes one further, calling the very idea of global warming a "Communist plot" designed to cripple Western industry, thus allowing post-Maoist China to dominate mankind. By enforcing the "criminalisation" of red meat, oil, "man's desire for women", the use of air-conditioners and the watching of Disney movies involving pink princesses, the Reds (disguised as Greens) really only seek to promote the nihilistic dogma that "all heterosexual intercourse is rape and every baby is a risk to the planet as it will increase carbon emissions", a process Araujo dubs "anti-natalism". Noting the etymological root of 'natal' is shared with that of the word 'nation', the Minister

MIGUEL SCHINCARIOL / APP VIA GETTY IMAGES



RAISA LEITE / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



ABOVE: Presidential candidate Bolsonaro after being stabbed in the stomach during a campaign rally in southern Brazil on 6 September 2018. Fortunately, God “is Brazilian” and intervened to save the soon-to-be-President’s life.

says that constant left-wing undermining of national pride is another means of persuading the non-Chinese to die off like dinosaurs: “It is not surprising that an anti-natalist left is also anti-nationalist.” Araujo critiques the current ‘Birth-Strike’ movement of pious millennial Lysistratas here, but perhaps such morbidities are less the result of an organised Commie conspiracy and more a symptom of general cultural malaise.

The best way for ‘Cultural Marxists’ to depress us into species-suicide is by “destroying the joy of living”. Hence political correctness now bans “good humour and a joke”, competitive sport, which is “a fascist thing”, and even “all Western thinkers since Anaximander”, hoping to “shut down healthy human psychic energy” in order to discourage breeding. Nations are then suffocated within trans-nationalist straightjackets, with once proud lands like Brazil becoming “just a good student in the school of globalism”, with timid diplomats “mechanically repeating the jargon of rights and justice, thus forming a world where neither people nor peoples are able to act or think on their own”. Leftists seek to “break the connection between God and man, making man a slave and God irrelevant”, while the counter-revolutionary Christian “metapolitical project” to which Araujo and his boss belong combat this by “opening up to the presence of God in politics and history”. The evil genius of today’s “climatism” is to promote belief in a massively over-inflated ‘crisis’, to con voters into ceding power to globalist UN gay-worshippers: “The climate [hysteric] says: ‘You there, you will destroy the planet. Your only option is to surrender everything to me, to surrender your life and your thinking, your freedom and your individual rights. I will tell you if you can drive, if you can

turn on the light, if you can have children, who you can vote for, what can be taught in schools... If you come with questions, with data different from the official data I control, I will call you a climate denier and throw you in the intellectual dungeon. Thanks?” “No thanks!” said Brazilians, 57 million of whom voted for Bolsonaro to regain their freedom of thought, speech and genitals. But if the ‘climate emergency’ has been rumbled by the *Bolsonaristas*, then surely a new fake crisis is needed to make the plebs submit to gay extinction? How about saying there’s this nasty new bug going around?

On 22 April Ernesto Araujo posted his bravest blog-entry yet, entitled ‘The Communa-Virus Has Arrived’, a response to the slovenly Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek’s latest insta-book *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World*. Radical leftist Žižek’s idea is that with capitalist governments now handing out free wage subsidies to quarantined workers and propping up entire ailing industries, we should live like this perpetually: “A... beneficial ideological virus will spread, and we only have to hope it will infect us; a virus that makes us imagine an alternative society, a society that goes beyond the nation-state and is realised in the form of solidarity and co-operation... Ghost-towns, stores with the door open and no customers... individuals in white masks... provides the image of a peaceful non-consumer world.” To Araujo, this reveals the true “liberticidal purposes” of the hyped-up pandemic: to “use it as a ladder to [force mankind] down into Hell, whose doors seemed blocked since the collapse of the Soviet Union”. Lockdown is really incarceration, with the WHO’s “dream world” that of “Wuhan quarantined”. Ceding power to the doctors of WHO is “only the first step in building planetary Communist solidarity”, with UNESCO soon usurping

control of our education systems, UNIDO of our industrial policies, and so on. As well as political correctness, says Araujo, Cultural Marxists have now unleashed ‘sanitary correctness’, which “cuffs and threatens” those who doubt the worth of many officially mandated measures and insist it is healthy to swim in shit: “If you say this or that, you put the whole society at risk, if you pronounce the word ‘freedom’, you are a subversive who can cause your entire population to die – so respect the rules.” At least until the emergency is over. Ah, but as with so many ‘temporary’ measures, perhaps “the emergency will last forever”. As if to prove his point, Araujo was quickly zapped by the thought police for tastelessly comparing Žižek’s utopia to “a major concentration camp” within which people would be confined “for their own good”. Araujo pointed out that he’d only done this to criticise Žižek’s own prior, and stupid, statement that the famous slogan above the gates of Auschwitz, ‘*Arbeit macht frei*’ (‘Work will set you free’), is “still the correct motto” for mankind to aspire to in a post-capitalist, post-Covid world, “despite the terrible use the Nazis made of it”. You should never let a good crisis go to waste, as they say.<sup>2</sup>

But where did Bolsonaro and Araujo get such paranoid-seeming ideas from in the first place? Next month, we sail down the Amazon seeking their true source: the writings of a Covid-sceptical former alchemist guru who believes that science and medicine are a giant Commie con-trick aimed at destroying reality itself in the name of the globo-gays.

## NOTES

**1** [www.advocate.com/world/2020/5/01/brazils-president-who-instructs-kids-be-gay-masturbate](http://www.advocate.com/world/2020/5/01/brazils-president-who-instructs-kids-be-gay-masturbate); [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-52316150](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-52316150); [www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/03/brazil-jair-bolsonaro-hits-out-dictatorial-rio-beach-bans](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/03/brazil-jair-bolsonaro-hits-out-dictatorial-rio-beach-bans); [www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/29/so-what-bolsonaro-shrugs-off-brazil-rising-coronavirus-death-toll](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/29/so-what-bolsonaro-shrugs-off-brazil-rising-coronavirus-death-toll); [www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/mar/27/jair-bolsonaro-claims-brazilians-never-catch-anything-as-covid-19-cases-rise](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/mar/27/jair-bolsonaro-claims-brazilians-never-catch-anything-as-covid-19-cases-rise); [www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/25/bolsonaro-brazil-wouldnt-feel-anything-covid-19-attack-state-lockdowns](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/25/bolsonaro-brazil-wouldnt-feel-anything-covid-19-attack-state-lockdowns); [www.thenation.com/article/world/coronavirus-brazil-bolsonaro-coup/](http://www.thenation.com/article/world/coronavirus-brazil-bolsonaro-coup/); [www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/world/americas/brazil-bolsonaro-coronavirus.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/world/americas/brazil-bolsonaro-coronavirus.html); [www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/i-believe-god-is-brazilian-and-he-made-me-president-jair-bolsonaro.html](http://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/i-believe-god-is-brazilian-and-he-made-me-president-jair-bolsonaro.html); <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-brazil-bolsonaro/brazils-bolsonaro-turns-to-prayer-in-coronavirus-crisis-idUKKBN21L3DF>; [www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/09/bolsonaro-e-abencoado-por-edir-macedo-em-culto-com-10-mil-fleis-em-sp.shtml](http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/09/bolsonaro-e-abencoado-por-edir-macedo-em-culto-com-10-mil-fleis-em-sp.shtml); <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2020/04/open-churches-and-miracle-cures-the-covid-19-response-in-bolsonaros-brazil/>; <https://theintercept.com/2018/10/28/jair-bolsonaro-elected-president-brazil/?comments=1>

**2** [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-49304358](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-49304358); [www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/15/brazil-foreign-minister-ernesto-araujo-climate-change-marxist-plot](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/15/brazil-foreign-minister-ernesto-araujo-climate-change-marxist-plot); <https://exame.abril.com.br/brasl/as-opinioes-polemicas-do-novo-chanceler-sobre-raca-fake-news-e-8-temas/>; [www.metapoliticabrasil.com/post/chegou-o-comunav%C3%ADrus](http://www.metapoliticabrasil.com/post/chegou-o-comunav%C3%ADrus); [www.timesofisrael.com/brazilian-foreign-minister-compares-social-distancing-to-concentration-camps/](http://www.timesofisrael.com/brazilian-foreign-minister-compares-social-distancing-to-concentration-camps/)



## Fort as a postmodern writer

Charles Fort wasn't just a data collector, says **ULRICH MAGIN**, but a proto-postmodernist whose literary allusions weren't always obvious

Within the last decade I have noticed a tendency to describe Fort's writing as inept; take, as the latest example, John Rimmer in *Fortean Times* (FT391:59), where he says that Fort "seems to be a pioneer postmodernist putting the English language through an endurance course". I disagree. The fun with Fort is that he was more than a data collector.

"She flushed a little -- flushes like goldfish in an aquarium, fluttering in her globe-like, colorless face -- goldfish in a globe of milk, perhaps -- or goldfish struggling in a globe of whitewash."

Certainly, this stream of consciousness avalanche of metaphors in the first chapter of *The Outcast Manufacturers* paints a vivid picture. If you have ever had to wear glasses, you will recognise this, from *Many Parts*: "when out in the street, we knew that the spectacles had come to stay. For we had lived in a fog and had not known it. We were in a different world; trees were not the blurs we had thought them; every leaf was outlined sharp and distinct; objects at a distance were smaller, because blurring had distorted, but again was clear, clean outline." Anyone who has ever worked on a novel knows that such sentences do not come easily.

In the *Books*, Fort has many hidden allusions – to Dante, to Shakespeare, to Melville – which are carefully woven into his text. He likes to show that he is well read, but he doesn't stress it. He leaves it to the reader to find out. Often, rather than simply quoting



ABOVE: "All hope abandon, ye who enter in".

a phrase, he applies it to his own specific needs.

There are simple allusions, such as the use of the archaic "I fear me" in his description of a giant hailstone: "At Seringapatam, India, about the year 1800, fell a hailstone – I fear me, I fear me: this is one of the profoundly damned." (*Books*, p.19) Fort must have been treated to Shakespeare in school, where we find "I fear me, never" from *Richard III* (Act 2), or "I have been in such a pickle since I saw you last that, I fear me, will never out of my bones", from *The Tempest* (Act 5, Scene 1). The phrase is very Elizabethan, having also been used in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*: "I fear me that this cry will raise the towne".

But take this paragraph from *The Book of the Damned*: "I'd like to know what strange, damned, excommunicated things have been sent to museums by persons who have felt convinced that they had seen what they may have seen... I

accept that over the door of every museum, into which such things enter, is written: 'Abandon Hope'." (*Books*, p.123)

This refers to Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Inferno, III), where Dante reads, written above the Gate of Hell, "Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate" or "All hope abandon, ye who enter in". Fort uses the sentence, which refers to lost souls, to describe his damned data, in this way both profaning religion and lifting his own subject to the heights of transcendent importance. It sounds simple in hindsight, but it is rather original if one actually notices it.

How many readers will have found the template for Fort's cry in *New Lands*, "Char me the trunk of a redwood tree. Give me pages of white chalk cliffs to write upon. Magnify me thousands of times, and replace my trifling immodesties with a titanic megalomania – then might I write largely enough for our subjects"?

(*Books*, p. 478)

He is echoing Herman Melville's sigh when confronted with writing about the whale: "Give me a condor's quill! Give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand! [...] To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme." (*Moby-Dick*, Chapter CIV)

I doubt that Fort knew what had inspired Melville, who took his ideas from the Koran. Fort's only reference to Islam is a lame and uninformed joke. (*Books*, p.220) Sura 18 reads: "If the sea were ink for [writing] the words of my Lord, the sea would be exhausted before the words of my Lord were exhausted, even if We brought the like of it as a supplement." And sura 31 similarly says: "And if whatever trees upon the earth were pens and the sea [was ink], replenished thereafter by seven [more] seas, the words of Allah would not be exhausted." So, Fort's few lines actually span 1,400 years of spiritual literature.

And metaphor and postmodernist quotation is not the only strength of his literary approach. His breathless style often echoes the mounting wonder he feels as he reads the pile of material he has assembled – it expresses content in form, not something easily achieved by a non-fiction writer. "Fort could be considered an heir of Emily Dickinson, in that he is a master of the dash."<sup>1</sup>

Fort was, above all, a writer, and he can be enjoyed as such. Don't let the rains of frogs get in the way.

### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Ed Park, "Master of metaphors and metaphysics", *Los Angeles Times*, 15 June 2008. [www.latimes.com/style/la-bkw-park15-2008jun15-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/style/la-bkw-park15-2008jun15-story.html). He is not the only modern critic to notice Fort. Alphonse-Maria Leo Knuth in *The Wink of the Word: A Study of James Joyce's Phatic Communication* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1976, p.58) even compares Fort's style to that of Joyce.

◆ **ULRICH MAGIN** is a longtime contributor to *FT* and the author of *Investigating the Impossible* (2011). He lives in Germany.

## Staff of life, stuff of legend

It's no surprise that the coronavirus lockdown has seen a resurgence in home baking, says **BEN GAZUR** – bread has always played a fundamental role in our folklore

No one at the start of 2020 could have predicted that the stars of social media this year would all be loaves of bread. With the world in lockdown, people have been returning to traditional foods for comfort – and to fill their Instagram timelines. Who knew a global pandemic would be a better spur to get the nation baking than *The Great British Bake-Off*?

When many people think of magic, they imagine hard-to-obtain or even slightly macabre ingredients being used in arcane rites. Yet magic has always been a practical art and uses what is to hand. For most of history, bread has been the staple food of the population. A large part of each day would have been involved in preparing, baking, and consuming bread. Given its central role in life, bread naturally became the focus of a great deal of folklore worldwide – but here I will focus on bread in British folklore.

We start imparting our traditions to the young very early. Every child is taught that they should eat their crusts to grow up strong. Or is it to have curly hair? Or a hairy chest? Perhaps all three. Folklore can be as springy and malleable as well-proved dough, and it also tends to grow over time. There is deeper magic in bread, though, than just the stories we tell children.

The very countryside of Britain is marked by bread. Dartmoor is home to Branscombe's Loaf, a large and roughly loaf-shaped rock. The tale goes that a 13th



*“They wobble to and fro as if they were kneading of dough with their arses”*

century bishop of Exeter called Walter Branscombe was travelling home over Dartmoor one day when his stomach began to grumble. From nowhere, the Devil, in disguise, appeared with a most appetising platter of bread and cheese. The holy, but hungry, man was on the point of accepting the Devil's cursed food when his servant spotted cloven hooves poking out from beneath the tempter's clothes. He knocked the bread from the Bishop's hand and when it hit the ground it immediately transformed into the large stone known ever since as Branscombe's Loaf. The Bishop should perhaps have learned from Jesus's own temptation with bread in the wilderness.

There are other associations with bread and stones in British folklore. Echinoids, ancient

creatures resembling sea urchins, are among the most common fossils found in Britain. To our ancestors, who lacked an understanding of deep time, these were not animal remains but Fairy or Pixie Loaves: placing one by the oven would ensure that all your bread would turn out well.

There are other old tales that might help today's trendy bakers. In Warwickshire, if it rained on Holy Thursday, housewives could be seen running out into the showers with pans and bottles to collect as much water as possible. This water was thought to be good for a year and a spoonful added to the leavening dough would guarantee a light bake.

Some secular bakers will tell you that scoring a loaf before placing it in the oven will stop the crust from exploding unevenly during baking, but this is not how people in the past thought of it. To cut a deep cross in dough was to protect your bread with Christian symbolism: the cross would stop the Devil sitting on the dough to prevent it rising, or foil the witches who might have cast an evil and envious eye on your delicious bread.

No matter how happy you are with your baking prowess, there

is one thing you must never do: singing is sure to sour your bread. In Scotland, the tradition was that the time a woman spent singing while baking is how long she would spend 'greeting' (crying) later.

The Internet is one of the most powerful forces in making love connections today, but bread once played a similar role in matchmaking. In households where a maiden daughter was still unwed she might be encouraged to sit on the oven while bread was baking. By some sympathetic magic, her attractiveness would increase as the dough was baked. At the very least, she would smell of fresh bread, and that's always appealing. In Lincolnshire, a lady looking to marry could take communion but conceal the consecrated bread in her mouth. If she spat this at a toad in the churchyard and it ate it, then the man she wished to marry would be overwhelmed with desire.

Perhaps the most direct method of attracting a partner was to make Cockle-Bread. The antiquarian John Aubrey described how to make it – and it's unlikely you will see this as one of *Bake-Off*'s technical challenges.



*“Young wenches have a wanton sport which they call moulding of Cocklebread; viz. They gett upon a Table-board, and then gather up their knees and their coates with their hands as high as they can and then they wabble to and fro with their Buttocks as if they were kneading of Dowgh with their Arses, and they say these words, viz.: ‘My Dame is sick & gonne to bed, And I’le go mowld my cocklebread.’”*

This seems to be a game or enchantment left over from a time when young ladies really did make their bread in this way and then serve it to the objects of their fancy as a way of making them ingest desire. They do say the best food is made with love...

Bread serves more than just amatory purposes. Being central to life it could also be central to death rituals. In several parts of Britain, a loaf of bread was placed on or passed over a corpse and delivered to a sin-eater, who in consuming the bread also took upon themselves the sins of the deceased. Aubrey described this being done for the departed as it “freed him (or her) from walking after they were dead.”

As well as delivering the soul from perdition, bread could also be used to reveal the location of a corpse. If a person drowned but their body was never recovered, two infallible tricks could be used to find them. The first involved filling a loaf with quicksilver, or mercury, and then setting it on the water. The bread would drift over to the corpse’s resting place and remain motionless. This method was employed in England as late as 1945 to attempt to locate a lost boy. The other method, and one less likely to poison your water supply, was to place a lit candle on a loaf and set it adrift. In both cases the liveliness of the flame and mercury were thought to call out to the unsettled soul of the deceased.

Even dreaming of bread could be an omen. An 1884 inquest in Walsall heard how a little girl had drowned in a canal. The mother had refused to let her daughter go to school that day on account of



ABOVE: Branscombe Loaf, Dartmoor, where the Devil once tried to tempt a local bishop with a platter of bread and cheese.

a dream she had of baking bread. Having lost other children, always preceded by a dream of bread, she thought it safest to keep the girl at home. Instead the girl wandered out of the house and drowned.

In the Christian era, bread has always been imbued with a powerful symbolism. Jesus may have told his followers that “Man shall not live by bread alone,” but that has not stopped a great deal of Christian folklore developing around our daily bread.

Disagreements over the symbolic nature of bread can have real world consequences. The question of whether the bread used in the Eucharist literally became Christ’s flesh (transubstantiation) or was a representation of it (consubstantiation) consigned hundreds of heretics on both sides of the debate to being burned at the stake. Even whether the bread had to be leavened or not contributed to the still open schism between Eastern and Western Christianity.

Of all the breads which could heal, however, the most powerful in folk tradition was not that used in Holy Communion but that made on Good Friday. A bucket of yeast set out on

Good Friday was thought to spontaneously generate a cross on its surface. Bread baked on that day had the power of never going mouldy – even if it did tend to go stubbornly hard over several months. One loaf baked on Good Friday in 1919 was held for many years in the Cambridge Folk Museum and, although a little stale, remained untouched by mould. New Forest belief had it that a Good Friday loaf was good for seven years of protection against curses and ill luck. Hanging such a loaf by the chimney ensured good bread for the rest of the year, but was also a ready source of medicine.

Norfolk folk also put great store in the powers of Good Friday bread. In one village, an old maid had given up her neighbour as already dead – “for she had already given her two doses of Good Friday bread without any benefit.” Happily, there must have been some other form of divine intervention for the neighbour afterwards recovered and lived a long life.

The stale bread could be grated up and put in a drink or brought out of the tin where it was stored, sprinkled with a little water and baked again to bring it back to some semblance of freshness. A

slice of this bread was enough to bring luck for the following year. The cures ascribed to Good Friday bread were even thought to work on animals.

Not all animals benefited from bread magic. A Scottish New Year’s tradition saw dogs being given a bit of charity by feeding them a crust of bread at the door. Unfortunately, this act of largesse was followed by driving the dog away with kicks and curses. “Get away, you dog. Whatever death of men or loss of cattle happens in this house to the end of the year be on your head.”

The history of bread is intertwined with that of humanity. The seeming alchemy of dough rising through the unseen action of yeast must have made it appear miraculous in the eyes of our ancestors – and it still fills us with wonder today. If this lockdown is teaching us anything, it is that the things we take so much for granted are far more magical than we usually think. Just don’t be tempted to add mercury to your bakes at home – butter spreads far better.

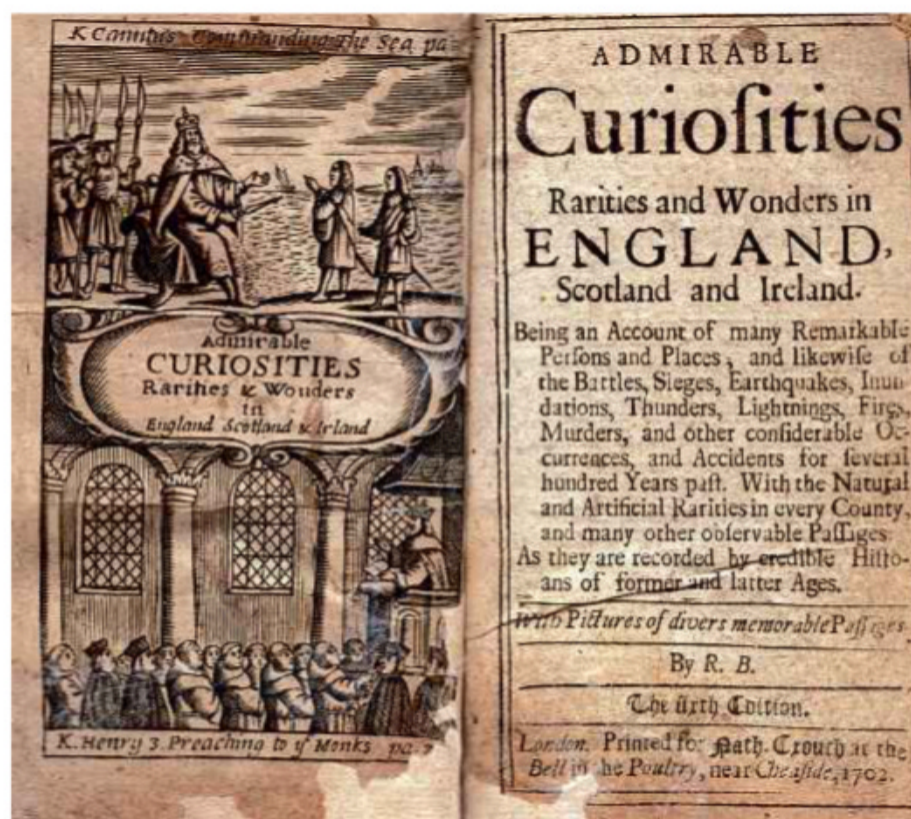
◆ BEN GAZUR is working on a book of British food folklore. He is looking for an agent and the perfect sourdough recipe.

## Curiosities, rarities and wonders...

**JAN BONDESON** finds some choice forteana in a compendium of curiosities by the 17th century bookseller Nathaniel Crouch

Recently I had occasion to purchase for £50, through the medium of eBay, the 1702 edition of *Admirable Curiosities, Rarities and Wonders*, recently repaired and rebound in full leather. It turned out that this curious little book has an interesting history. Its author, the London bookseller Nathaniel Crouch (1632-1725), delighted in producing cheap and popular books about British history and topography, with the occasional foray into forteana. The son of a tailor, Crouch served as an apprentice printer for seven years before joining the Stationer's Company in 1663. He published his many books under the alias 'R.B.', for Richard or Robert Burton; although an erudite and well-read man, in spite of his lack of formal education, he was a blatant hack and plagiarist, who freely 'borrowed' long passages from other writers.

Nathaniel Crouch wrote at least 23 books, which he offered for sale for just one shilling each; he constantly reminded his readers about the extraordinary value for money represented by his literary concoctions. *Admirable Curiosities, Rarities and Wonders* was first published in 1682, and my copy is the fourth edition, with a frontispiece and seven woodcut illustrations. The book is divided by county, the curiosities of each shire being systematically reviewed: an overview of the topography of the county in question; anecdotes about kings, noblemen and martyrs; stories of the downfall of the high and mighty; and a fair sprinkling of true forteana.



The activities of the Welsh, Scottish and Irish are given just six pages in total, at the very end of the book, although a liberal 12 pages are devoted to advertising Crouch's other books. Injudicious critics have called Crouch's books literature for juvenile and uneducated minds, but the facts presented are clearly too recondite for the early 18<sup>th</sup> century urchins, as they would be for the young Internet addicts of the present age.

Nathaniel Crouch had all kinds of monstrosities to present: children crying in the womb, blood raining from the sky, and barnacle geese breeding from rotten wood lying in the water, and the famed Orford wild man recorded by Ralph of Coggeshall (see FT317:46, 377:34). In 1189, fishermen in Orford, Suffolk, took in their nets "a Fish like a Man in all respects, which was kept six Months, he spake not a Word, eat all manner of Meats; he was brought to Church, but showed no signs of Devotion, at length he stole to Sea, and was never seen after." A strange birth was detailed as follows: "In 1553, at Middleton-stony, a Woman brought forth a Child with two perfect Bodies from the Navel

upwards; the Legs grew out of the midst where the Bodied joined, and had it but one issue for the Excrements of both, they were girls and lived 18 days." This was clearly a case of dicephalus dipus tetrabrachius, similar to the notable Tocci brothers who lived to reach adulthood (see FT242:36-41). Another monstrous birth was also described: "In 1613, at Standich a Maiden Child was born, having four Arms, four

LEFT: The frontispiece to the fourth edition of Nathaniel Crouch's *Admirable Curiosities, Rarities and Wonders*, published in 1702.

BELOW: The church of Withy Comb is struck by lightning in 1632.

Legs, two Bellies joined to one Back, one Head with two Faces, one before, the other behind, like the Picture of Janus." This confused description is likely to concern a janiceps deformity, of incomplete conjoined twinning. There was also a remarkable account of rejuvenation in a very old man: "In 1657, Machal Vivian, Minister of Lesbury, being 110 years Old, who for 40 years before could not read without Spectacles, yet then his Sight was so renewed, that he could read the smallest PRINT without; he had lost most of his Teeth, but now new ones came, and having been long Bald, this hair came again like a Childs; he was before feeble, but now his Strength increased so as to walk some Miles, to study much, and preach twice every Lord's Day."

Crouch had a great fondness for meteorological curiosities: mighty thunderstorms, tempests and whirlwinds occur with regularity in the pages of





ABOVE LEFT: Lady Godiva. ABOVE RIGHT: The groaning Brampton ash tree, from 1606. BELOW: King Edward at Berkeley Castle, having his beard cut off. BOTTOM: Queen Emma, mother of Edward the Confessor, undergoing an ordeal walking barefoot past red-hot ploughshares.

*Admirable Curiosities, Rarities and Wonders.* In September 1560, “near Worthington, a Whirl-wind tore up Trees by the Roots, and threw down a House in the Street; the Chapel was much shaken and the Chancel in danger of falling: It passed on with great noise to Worthington-Hall, overturned five Barns, a Gate-House and a Stack of Chimnies...” In 1568, the last year of Queen Mary, “a Tempest of Thunder, within a Mile of Nottingham, beat down all the Houses and Churches in two Towns, cast the Bells into the Church Yards, and some Webs of Lead were thrown 400 Foot off.”

“In 1580, was a strange Apparition in Somersetshire, of 60 Personages all cloathed in black, who continued some time and vanished; then another like number appeared in bright Armour, and encountered one another and vanished. This was sworn before Sir George Norton, by 4 Men that saw it. In 1596, Dec 6 being Sunday, in the Cathedral of Wells during Sermon, was a sudden darkness with Thunder and Lightning, which threw People upon the Ground, all the Church seemed in a Flame, with a loathsome stink, the Tempest over, and the People recovering their Senses, some were marked with strange Figures on their Bodies and their Garments not

## “An Ash Tree shook both in the Body and the Boughs”



perished ...” In 1632, during sermon in the church of Withy Comb, there “happened a great darkness, and a terrible Thunder like Cannon, the darkness so increasing that the People could not see each other, extraordinary Lightning filled the Church with Fire, Smoak and a smell like Brimstone, a Ball of Fire came in at the Window, and passed through the Church which so afrighted them, that some fell on their Knees, others on their Faces, and one upon another...”

In 1606, at Brampton near Gainsborough, “an Ash Tree shook both in the Body and Boughs, and there proceeded from thence Sighs and Groans, like those of a Man troubled in his Sleep, as if he felt some sensible Torments. Many climbed to the Top, where they heard the Groans more plainly than below. One being atop spoke to the Tree, but presently came down astonished, and lay grovelling on the Earth Speechless three Hours, and then reviving said, Brampton, Brampton, thou art much bound to Pray.”

Then there was the extraordinary Book-Fish: “In 1626 a Codfish was brought to the market in Cambridge for sale, in the Maw was found a Book bound up in canvas, being several Treatises by Mr John Friths; this

Fish was caught upon the coast of Lin, and being cut open, the Garbridge was thrown by, which a Woman looking upon, espied the Canvas, and taking it out, found the Book wrapped in it...” (See Bob Rickard and John Michell, *Rough Guide to the Unexplained*, 2007, p236).

We will finish with an account of the gluttony of Nicholas Wood, known as the Great Eater of Kent (for more on Wood and other extreme gluttons, see **FT151:34-39**): he could “eat a whole Sheep of sixteen shilling price, raw, at one Meal; another time he eat 30 dozen of Pidgeons; at Sir William Sidlys he ate as much as 30 Men; at the Lord Wootons in Kent, he eat at one Meal 84 Rabbets, enough for 168 Men, allowing each half a rabbit; he devoured 18 yards of Black Pudding, and having eat 60 pounds of Cherries, said they were but wash Meat; he eat a howle Hog once, and after it three Pecks of Damsons...”

Everything you would ever want to know about Nathaniel Crouch and his books is in the article by R Mayer, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27, 1994, pp391-419.

♦ **JAN BONDESON** is a senior lecturer at Cardiff University, the author of numerous books and a regular contributor to FT.

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## Practical jokes and toilet humour

Poltergeists are fun to read about, **Alan Murdie** finds in this enjoyable new study; but it's not so amusing when you're the recipient of their troublesome behaviour

### Blithe Spirits

An Imaginative History of the Poltergeist

SD Tucker

Amberley Publishing 2020

Pb, 352pp, £16.99, bib, ind, ISBN 9781445667287

In his classic *Poltergeist Over England* (1945) Harry Price wrote: "The Poltergeist is mischievous, destructive, noisy, cruel, erratic, thievish, demonstrative, purposeless, cunning, unhelpful, malicious, audacious, teasing, ill-disposed, spiteful, ruthless, resourceful, biting, pinching and stigmatising and vampiric". Seventy-five years on, SJ Tucker proves the truth of Price's assertion, supplying a very forteen and humorous take on poltergeisty.

Drawing upon an amorphous collection of historical facts, textual references and extraordinary claims, Tucker reveals the poltergeist as a global citizen engaged in elaborate masquerades and practical jokes in many lands.

Sometimes crude, sometimes complex, these stunts often far surpass the best tricks of the most talented sleight-of-hand conjurors.

As Michael Goss in his 1979 bibliography of poltergeists observed, this makes the subject "fun to read about". Tucker concurs, declaring "virtually everything the poltergeist does can be viewed as being amusing or humorous in one sense or another".

Tucker duly salutes the poltergeist as the supreme joker, arguing the mythical Trickster figures such as Loki and Hermes provide

the best paradigm for confronting its many enigmas.

This insight gives him ample justification for reviewing and framing the phenomenon within comedic, literary, artistic and legendary allusions.

His book is crammed with examples; he invites readers to inspect the most baffling, perverse, irrational and offensive incidents on record.

Displaying the poltergeist at its best and worst, he extracts comedy from many otherwise sombre accounts, shepherding a choice selection into provocative chapters headed Practical Jokes, Vandalism, Slapstick, Absurdity of Location, Funny Disguises, Theatres of the Absurd, Defying Authority, Blasphemy and more.

This requires a robust sense of humour and even a strong stomach at times; on occasion it

can be like a tour around a sewer in a glass-bottomed boat. Poltergeists are not for the squeamish.

In doing this, Tucker does not spare more scientific researchers, rightly considering some parapsychologists as fighting shy of confronting the fouler tricks of certain poltergeists,

such as daubing excrement or spraying urine (both mercifully rare).

In a chapter entitled "Toilet humour" he examines this unpleasant aspect, omitted from many popular studies and dramatised versions of tales.

His boldness in treating this taboo topic has rendered Tucker liable to an unfair charge of lavatorial humour lobbed by one reviewer (for the *Spectator*),

*Tucker salutes the poltergeist as the supreme joker, a mythical Trickster figure such as Loki*

whereas his purpose is actually more subtle.

Here, Tucker is taking the provocative historic mantle of the Licensed Fool or jester utilising humour to expose areas which establishments across many eras have shirked (save for avowed Freudians).

And it was, after all, the poltergeists which stood accused of throwing filth in the first place.

The author has certainly read many books and I am impressed by his scholarship; in many areas I feel he may write more deeply than he realises. Yet one senses, as he inevitably heads to a "non-conclusion", that he has been overwhelmed by the material confronted.

Forced into adopting abstract and absurdist themes, lacking any coherent or agreed reference point, *Blithe Spirits* is a rather struggling pantomime in places, caught in a quagmire of absurdity, not knowing where it goes next or where it will ultimately lead.

Thus, as to poltergeist origins, whether the forces are good, bad or indifferent, Tucker cannot tell, offering up the immortal and all-powerful Trickster as the best and only touchstone for tackling these questions.

Overall, *Blithe Spirits* is an excellent book presenting a novel paradigm and in-depth treatment of selected topics, and superior to many other works in this field. I would recommend

it for anyone seeking to think seriously on the subject and its cultural implications.

That said, I maintain three significant reservations. Firstly, there are omissions, arising from the author having gone no further than books, falling short of examining the original texts and sources accumulated in psychological research from which these volumes were derived.

Secondly, Tucker does not record having personally investigated any poltergeist outbreak for himself, or tracing living witnesses to one (for example, the Battersea case 1956-6). Reading about battles is a very different matter from experiencing one.

Thirdly, laughing at events at a distance is fine, especially 50 or 100 years afterwards, but there is a point where amusement stops. Fortunately, the vast majority of poltergeist outbreaks prove harmless, but I would say this is not the book to give to people who currently believe themselves afflicted by poltergeist activity.

Of course, retaining a sense of humour is no bad thing, frequently serving as a coping strategy for unpalatable facts and for quelling exaggerated fears. But only infrequently does the author fittingly appreciate the often truly traumatic and occasionally tragic consequences of living in a ghost-shattered home, acknowledging such human impacts as "beyond satire".

The mood of cosmic jollity pervading the book cannot fully do justice to such stressful situations and could result in a blind spot for many readers. Finding oneself on the receiving end of a poltergeist may turn out to be no laughing matter, as this book also implicitly demonstrates.

★★★★★



# Prehistoric penguins?

Jerome Clark finds much to appreciate in a study of cryptozoology in Florida

## Sun, Sand and Sea Serpents

David Goudsward

Anomalist Books 2020

Pb, 282pp, £12.99, bib, ind, ISBN 9781949501117

Cryptozoological surveys that focus on a particular area are a familiar strain in the literature of allegedly mysterious, uncatalogued animals. In *Sun, Sand and Sea Serpents* David Goudsward devotes 16 chapters to anomalous creatures reported in the salt and fresh waters around his native state of Florida.

What makes this book stand apart from the competition is the author's deep research, critical intelligence and knowledge of recognised, if sometimes obscure, animal life. Besides contributing something to cryptozoology's continuing conversation, Goudsward gives readers an education in relevant areas of mainstream zoology, not to mention illuminating aspects of Florida history and folklore.

While he proposes conventional explanations for a significant number of reports, these explanations seem to fall naturally from the evidence. Nothing feels forced or contrived, and Goudsward is not operating from the presumption that there can't be cryptids. When he has eliminated prosaic identifications, however, he is reluctant to go further to propose theories, either specific or overarching. He is less a scientist than a scientifically informed journalist, and besides writing well, he never loses his balance.

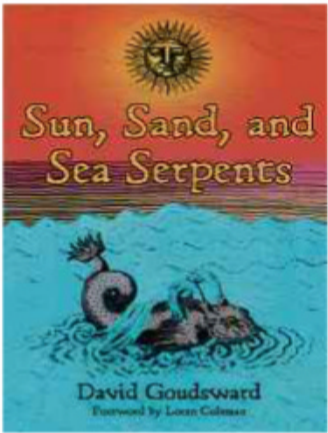
Though broadly sympathetic to the cryptozoological quest, Goudsward is often critical of naïve practitioners who betray their ignorance with extravagant but unwarranted claims. Admirably, he rejects

the temptation – if it is one; maybe it's just in his nature to be gently amused as opposed to intellectually outraged – to rain caustic epithets on their heads. If never explicitly expressed, his point is that you need to possess a good grounding in conventional marine biology before you pronounce a reported something to be outside its boundaries. Still, Bernard Heuvelmans, among the sometimes woolly thinkers Goudsward mentions, had a solid academic education in zoology.

A particularly interesting chapter takes up the tale of Three Toes, a supposed creature that left its prints on assorted beaches in 1948 and led excitable souls to wonder if a living dinosaur was in the neighbourhood. The story attracted attention far beyond the immediate area and drew, among others, biologist and fortean Ivan T Sanderson to the scene. Though locals were confident that this was a hoax executed by known, habitual pranksters – something Sanderson soon verified for himself in correspondence with the principal actor – for reasons unknown he publicly professed perplexity. Two decades later, to the bewilderment of those who knew the truth (and who knew Sanderson did, too), he proposed that Three Toes were attached to a giant prehistoric penguin [FT66:41-43]. It's sobering to reflect that Sanderson is widely considered a founder of cryptozoology.

Goudsward concludes: "There will still be sea monster sightings. There will also be hoaxes and sincerely believed misidentifications. The question is: what creatures do the ocean depths still hide? Cryptozoology continues to lead the search."

★★★★



## Unsolved Aviation Mysteries

Five Strange Tales Of Air And Sea

Keith McCloskey

The History Press 2020

Pb, 224pp, £11.99, illus, bib, ind, ISBN 9780750992589

The author has published several books about historical mysteries with an occasional fortean touch, such as his 2013 book on the curious Dyatlov Pass incident [FT245:30-35, 377:4] involving skiers in 1959. His latest offers the same approach but takes to the skies.

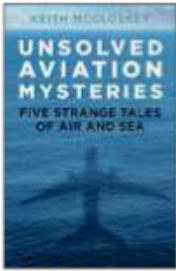
If you love a good real-life mystery with multiple possible outcomes that sometimes hint at the odd, alongside less weird possibilities, then you will like this book.

Especially so if you are a fan of the long running TV series *Air Crash Investigations*; you will recognise the way the facts are pieced together and presented to seek understanding of officially unsolved disappearances or otherwise baffling incidents involving aircraft.

The five cases in this book are told in an easy-to-read way, but mix the intrigue of the mundane approach with more extreme options that have been contemplated over the years in a quest to resolve the incident. The events range from ones that a reader of this magazine might recall to others where the mystery will be new to you, just as it was to me. All remain riddles that still need to be unravelled.

The cases straddle much of the 20th century. The first, from 1928, is the intriguing case of a mega-rich businessman who disappeared from an aircraft he had just purchased while approaching the French coast on a flight to Brussels from Croydon. He went missing after telling six others on board that he was just going to use the onboard toilet. The most recent is the mystery of a Lear Jet over Sri Lanka in 1983 where the twists and turns of its sudden disappearance and the eye-witness accounts of what they saw below leave several possible ways to interpret what happened.

Also included are the Kennedy clan links with aircraft tragedies – one of which happened close to



the now infamous Rendlesham Forest in Suffolk in 1944. More directly UFO-related is the disappearance in 1953 over Canada of a US military plane after radar recorded it "merging" with an unidentified "blip" detected on radar.

The story that gets the most attention has a personal link for the author; the aircraft is one he knew as a childhood plane-spotter, when it was based at the Scottish airport he frequented.

At Christmas 1975 a Cessna vanished with its pilot in unresolved circumstances off the Isle of Mull; a famous UFO event occurred six years later, close to the spot where this plane took to the skies. The Cessna's disappearance has become one of the most debated cases in Scottish aviation history. No wreckage was found so it was presumed that the plane crashed in deep water. But the body of the only occupant was found four months later after a fruitless search had been called off. The dead pilot was up a hill away from the sea, spread across a tree. There was no sign of the Cessna anywhere nearby.

Officially the location of this aircraft remains unresolved. But you might have a different view after reading this book.

Jenny Randles

★★★★

## They Are Already Here

UFO Culture and Why We See Saucers

Sarah Scoles

Pegasus Press 2020

Hb, 304pp, \$14.99, notes, ind, ISBN 9781643133058

Science writer Sarah Scoles saw her first UFO in 2017, the same year that saw a fairly big revelation about the United States government's interest in UFOs. That December the *New York Times* ran a front page story about the Defense Department's Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program and Las Vegas-based company Bigelow Aerospace, which told the *Times* they possessed and were studying "metal alloys and other materials that... had been recovered from unidentified aerial phenomena".

Scoles soon realised her own UFO was a communications satellite, and that the bright



light it briefly emitted in her direction, causing her to question if she was actually having her own close encounter, was simply a trick of light and circumstances. Likewise, the revelations in the *Times* article have since proven to be much less revolutionary than they seemed at first, as the evidence presented by their sources, particularly videos purporting to show Navy pilots encountering UFOs, has been picked apart in the years since and never replaced with anything more substantial.



It was this particular rabbit hole that Scoles followed into the Wonderland of 21st-century ufology, though, and the impetus for this book, a first-person account of her time spent researching UFO research and researchers. It's an observant, remarkably thorough and sharply-written survey of the subject by an extremely open and game sceptic, one who is far more interested in learning than debunking.

Each chapter is devoted to a particular aspect of UFO culture, weaving a basic history with Scoles's travels all over the western United States and her interviews with a widely ranging and interesting cast of characters from various levels of expertise, belief and commitment. There are chapters on the history of the US government's official attitude towards unknown objects in the sky from Kenneth Arnold's 1947 sighting through 1965's Condon Committee, on Roswell and on Area 51. Scoles visits the 2018 International UFO Congress in Phoenix, Arizona, and a Mutual UFO Network meeting, a springboard into a discussion of MUFON and the history of civilian investigatory organisations.

Scoles also spends some time at Colorado's UFO Watchtower, erected by Judy Messoline in 2000 as a tourist attraction meant to capitalise on the San Luis Valley's reputation for having the most UFO sightings per capita in the US. Emblematic of her approach, the chapter finds stories more interesting than the possibility that mysterious sightings in the

sky might potentially turn out to be extraterrestrial in origin, among the perfectly terrestrial people around the Watchtower.

Until incontrovertible evidence of the extraterrestrial hypothesis emerges, the most fascinating thing about the mystery of UFOs will always be our own fascination with them. Whether a reader is a curious beginner, a lapsed enthusiast or an expert, Scoles's focus on the people watching the skies and what motivates them makes hers a very welcome and markedly different kind of UFO book.

J Caleb Mozzocco

★★★★

## Ireland's Forgotten Past

**A History of the Overlooked and Disremembered**

*Turtle Bunbury*

Thames & Hudson 2020

Hb, 224pp, £14.95, illus, bib, ind, ISBN

9780500022535

Turtle Bunbury's family have farmed in County Carlow since the 1660s; he grew up and lives in a Victorian house stuffed with curios which inspired some of these tales. A ring fort, a ruined abbey, a dolmen and barrow graves are all close to his home. He is determined to ensure that as new narratives emerge the old ones will not be forgotten.

So his cycle of stories opens with a Devonian Tetrapod's fossilised tracks and closes with Operation Shamrock, when orphans were brought to Ireland from a devastated Europe in 1946. Some of these pieces could make for grim reading, but Turtle's lighthearted style wafts you along as he seamlessly provides background information to the tales.

Lord Rosse, Irish Grand Master of the Freemasons, lived a life of debauchery. He toured Europe, becoming a sorcerer and dabbler in the Dark Arts. He wrote *Dionysus Rising*, supposedly based on scrolls looted from the library of Alexandria. Around 1720, Rosse, and some rowdies known as the Bucks, set up the Hell-Fire Club in a lodge in the Dublin Mountains. They held black masses and orgies and reputedly sacrificed black cats. The Devil even dropped in one night to play cards with Rosse. This was play-

acting: they were just a bunch of young rakes, the Bullingdon Boys of their day. Their masquerade, though, extended to the burning of Catholic churches. Being non-sectarian, they also disrupted Protestant services, streaking in front of bishops. Dean Jonathan Swift declared them to be "monsters".

Ireland had its 18th-century Gold Rush in the Glen of Avoca; the largest nugget found weighed 682 grams and was turned into a snuffbox for George III. But when Charles Stewart Parnell spent long hours panning in the Gold Mines river in the late 19th century he only found enough gold to line a wedding band for his fiancée.



Prince Bertie (later Edward VII) joined the Grenadier Guards at the Curragh Army Camp in 1861. He formed a close relationship with one of the "Curragh Wrens", the local ladies of the night who built their homes in the gorse bushes.

This is an entertaining collection covering diverse aspects of Irish history, including the wily Catholic tailor who made his fortune outfitting Cromwell's soldiers, Queen Victoria's visit to Ireland and the Statutes of Kilkenny. Also a few more forteen gems: the Bear Cave, how the Bleeding Horse Pub got its name, the Big Wind of 1839 and the Cherokees whose antics rivalled those of the Bucks.

The 100 woodcut illustrations are evocative of the stories they accompany, bringing to life a palaeolithic bear and an angry mob, among others.

Páirc O Corráin

★★★★

## A New Dictionary of Fairies

*Morgan Daimler*

Moon Books 2020

Pb, 392pp, £17.99, ISBN 9781789040364

Naming fairies is a dangerous business, and not just for the usual supernatural reasons, since it invites comparison with Katharine Briggs's celebrated *Dictionary*. It's not easy to compete with a classic. But Morgan Daimler has many things in her favour: up-to-date reading, a good judgment in sources and a fluent

command of Irish. If you want a reliable statement of the current position on Changelings, Fairy Food, Glamour, or Shape-shifting – all in Celtic narrative, no English allowed past the door – then this is your guide. There are also sections on modern themes such as Aliens, Fairy Doors and Pointed Ears. It's really quite good for a book in which the views of the Californian pagan subculture seem to count for more than those of historians or folklorists.

It's a good book even though it was, I suspect, written at speed – a lot of entries refer us back to previous dictionaries rather than primary sources. A critical editor might have restrained Daimler's tendency to quote ballads at length, including two separate translations of "Erlkönig". And it's never quite clear who the dictionary is for: despite the lexicographical surface, it may be marketed as a how-to manual. Certainly Daimler is concerned that her readers might actually try to cure fairy possession by imbibing

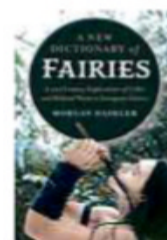
frankincense, myrrh and shaved agate, because she explains this is likely to be a health risk.

The section on Nicnevin hesitates between historical philology (conclusion: we don't know who she was) and a desire to produce some narrative suitable for pagan practice. And an author who writes, "I have encountered the Hunt myself a time or two" is not likely to appreciate Ronald Hutton's view that the Wild Hunt is in fact a scholarly construct.

That's the challenge of a fairy dictionary: is it meant to be a list of real beings or of arbitrary words which changed their meanings over time, of the mutable tale-types told many times over in different times and countries or of the best-loved folk and literary performances of those stories? There's no easy answer to that one, and Daimler has something for all readers. It's sad that she should have been let down by Moon Books, who "operate a distinctive and ethical publishing philosophy" which clearly doesn't involve proof-reading. There are misprints everywhere and the bibliography is a shambles.

Jeremy Harte

★★★★



# Mediaeval malice

The accusation of witchcraft has long been used to bring down women of power – but this book could have gone into more depth

## Royal Witches

From Joan of Navarre to Elizabeth Woodville

Gemma Hollman

The History Press 2019

Pb, 320pp, £16.99, illus, notes, bib, ind, ISBN 9780750989404

Fortune's wheel spins faster and faster, setting some up, pulling others down. This sense of profound political and personal uncertainty, when people are confronted by forces seemingly beyond all human control, provides the central theme for this collective biography of four noble late-mediaeval women.

At one point, Joan of Navarre, Eleanor Cobham, Jacquetta of Luxembourg and Elizabeth Woodville stood close to the apex of power in the English state, united by marriage alliances with the ruling dynasty, and through the possession of enormous wealth, privilege and power.

Yet all were smeared by accusations of witchcraft and one of them was broken as a result.

Written in a popular, easy and at times breathless style, the narrative leads us through the internecine power struggles that surrounded Henry VI as a child-king, and the implosion of the House of Lancaster, concluding with the death of Elizabeth Woodville in 1492 in respectable semi-retirement as a matriarch within the new Tudor dynasty.

Along the way, we are treated to tales of the workings of love and image magic, of nigromancy and divination, and of an attempt to cast spells that would wither and waste the boy king.

A cunning woman burns at Smithfield as a heretic, styled as "the Witch of Eye"; a lead figure of a man broken in two and tied back together with wire is

presented to the Earl of Warwick at his castle; and in October 1441 a fearful Henry VI pays £20 to "doctors, notaries and clerics working against the superstitious craft of necromancy, spell casting and diviners".

Curiously, however, given the book's title and stated purpose, considerations of witchcraft and magic are seldom to the fore and the set of circumstances that generated the charges levelled against the four women are tacitly assumed to have originated in the simple combination of political expediency with popular

superstition, and escape any thorough investigation.

Now, it may well be that the paucity of source material rules out a definitive judgment on each of their cases, but to conclude that we "will never know" anything more than the outlines of the charges seems both

to short-change the reader and to occlude the early history of witch persecution in England.

We have the standard formulation of village witchcraft, familiar from writers such as Jules Michelet onwards, as being rooted in the practices of the "old medicine woman... using herbs and charms", but we have no sense of the freshness, radicalism and savagery of the intellectual debates on the nature of witchcraft that swirled around the University of Paris and which, with the help of English gold, sent Joan of Arc to the stake at Rouen as a witch.

In part, this is because the limiting of the study to the discussion of the lives of the privileged – in more than an echo of Agnes Strickland's 19th-century work on the queens of England – excludes the testimony of other women, such as Marjery Jourdemaine (who burned at Smithfield) and Jane

Shore (Edward IV's mistress and Shakespeare's original "scarlet woman"), who were likewise branded as witches.

History from "the top down" only gets us so far. A surer approach might have been to suggest that the rapid development of demonology as a subject for intellectual inquiry and theorisation, and the transformation of witchcraft from a superstition to a crime, following the trial of Joan of Arc in 1431, began to impact upon the increasingly unstable arena of elite politics in England over the following decade and served as a further tool in the armoury of those who wished to bring down Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester.

In the first instance, they attacked his wife – Eleanor Cobham – on charges of witchcraft, ruining her reputation and effecting her humiliation, divorce and imprisonment for life.

Gloucester's fall swiftly followed and with it the ruin of a man who – although he appears in these pages as being "rash" and "bolshy" – had claim to being England's first Renaissance prince: a humanist and bibliophile whose agents avidly sought texts from Italy and the East in order to reconnect with a lost, classical and pagan world of learning.

The story of the genesis of witch belief is far more nuanced and wide-ranging than is suggested by *Royal Witches*, but this is still a book that – as with the studies of the Wars of the Roses written by Philippa Gregory – will provide entertainment, spark interest and deliver information for those who wish to revel in the glories and excesses of past elites and to celebrate the achievements of individual women in the brief moments when fortune chose to bestow her favours.

John Callow

★★★★

## 101 Facts You Didn't Know About Space

Mark Thompson

Pen & Sword 2020

Hb, 184pp, £20, illus, ISBN 9781526744579

If you can get past the annoyingly patronising title, this is a really fun book. Only 10 of the facts were completely new to me, plus another dozen I only knew because I'd researched them for books or magazine articles.

But I'm very much an outlier of Mark Thompson's target audience. He styles himself "the people's astronomer", and he's at his best with complete beginners, which is who this book is really aimed at.

Each of the 101 facts is explained in a single page of chattily informal text, most

of them

accompanied by a full-page, full-colour illustration.

The range of topics includes history (e.g.

Fact 33: "the first spacewalk

nearly ended in tragedy"), basic astronomy (e.g. Fact 49: "the most common star is a red dwarf"), science (e.g. Fact 13: "metal sticks together in space" – which I didn't know) and good old-fashioned strange-but-true (e.g. Fact 14: "Astronauts cannot burp in space" – I didn't know that either).

There's also some Hollywood debunking (e.g. Fact 7: "Space is completely silent") and even a bit of sleaze (Fact 28: "Zero gravity makes copulation rather tricky" – one of the few that isn't illustrated).

As with most books of this type, Thompson doesn't cite any sources for his "facts", but I didn't notice any outrageous errors. Occasionally he oversimplifies technical concepts, or describes a theory without mentioning other competing ones, but it would miss the point to quibble about such things.

The book's purpose isn't to educate people to degree standard, but to give them a basic enthusiasm for the subject – and it's perfectly designed to do just that.

Andrew May

★★★★



# THE HAUNTED GENERATION

BOB FISCHER ROUNDS UP THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE  
PARALLEL WORLDS OF POPULAR HAUNTOLOGY...

"I am the Spirit of Dark and Lonely Water. Ready to trap the unwary, the show-off, the fool..."

A merciless instigator of childhood drownings, drifting silently through building sites and beauty spots alike, this sinister spectre made a profound impact on 1970s childhood. The central character of a 90-second Public Information Film produced to deter cagoul-clad tearaways from high-jinks around stagnant pools and dystopian duckponds, he now weaves his dark magic on a new Blu-ray collection from the British Film Institute.

There have been collections of Public Information Films before, of course – some released by the BFI themselves, and others by Network, whose comprehensive *Charley Says* DVDs gathered together almost 300 of the unsettling, minute-long shorts that peppered our TV schedules for decades. *Lonely Water* aside, this new set – *The Best Of COI: Five Decades of Public Information Films* – largely eschews these short, sharp shocks for longer, more ambitious productions: 23 films produced by the Orwellian-sounding Central Office of Information between the 1940s and 1980s. It's an immersive, languorous insight into a long-vanished Britain.

Predictably, it is the 1970s films that provide the real trauma. *Apaches*, from 1977, is the most notorious inclusion here, a 27-minute agricultural bloodbath in which six children, lost in their own Wild West-inspired fantasy world, descend on a rain-sodden farm and are systematically picked off by a combination of tractors, slurry pits and rat poison. It's the dark side of *Farming Outlook* – Sam Peckinpah directing for the Children's Film Foundation.

Cut from similar cloth is 1978's *Building Sites Bite*, in which sensible Paul and Jane are visited by posh-but-dim cousin Ronald. "I reckon he's a twit..." muses Paul, and employs comprehensively grim methods



to prove it. Imagining himself and his sister as silver-suited cosmic overlords, he inflicts multiple imaginary deaths on his cravat-sporting nemesis by transporting him (via a garden shed TARDIS) to a succession of deserted building sites. Here, exposed electrical cables and collapsing walls repeatedly nudge Ronald from an increasingly thankless mortal coil. Connoisseurs of similarly bleak 1970s oddness may also enjoy *Drive Carefully Darling*, in which Colin Baker, John Challis and Christopher Owen play lab-coated Numskulls, respectively operating the Brain, Ego and Memory of a reckless driver caught in a fatal car crash. Baker's despairing attempts to contact the rest of the dying body ("Brain to eyes! For God's sake, come in!") are genuinely chilling.

Less traumatic but equally redolent of their respective eras, the set's earlier films offer tantalising glimpses

of a promised future that never quite materialised. 1952's *Brief City* dares to imagine a bright, almost sci-fi existence, its Festival of Britain-inspired roam around London's transformed South Bank including glimpses of the floating, rocket-like 'Skylon' sculpture that almost pointed the way to the Space Age. Similarly, exciting visions are dangled in 1965's *Design For Today*, a wordless film collage of a life filled with the new wave of pop-tastic British design, cruelly promising a future of E-Type Jaguars parked outside gleaming skyscrapers and plush apartments grooving to the sounds of funky Hammond organ workouts.

This combination of thwarted utopias and childhood unsettlement has provided untold inspiration for the legion of 21st century artists whose work features regularly in this column, and this immaculate collection acts almost as a set

text. It epitomises a pivotal moment in mid-20th century Britain, when the plummy-voiced agents of these state-funded films graduated from reassuring, post-war optimism to a grim acceptance that death and danger were omnipresent.

There are fascinating diversions: 1944's *Children of The City* looks at Scotland's approved school system, and *Insight: Zandra Rhodes* is COI stalwart Peter Greenaway's revealing glimpse into the life of everyone's favourite pink-haired fashion designer.

But the collection's concluding presentation is peak hauntedness. *Never Go With Strangers*, from 1971, alerts unsuspecting infants to the dangers of abduction with a gentle sternness that is both chilling and heartbreaking. "Most people are good and kind, but there are some that want to hurt children," it warns, as a procession of smiling, sinister loners attempt to lure unsure poppets away from their favourite playgrounds and funfairs. Shown extensively to terrified children in parquet-floored school halls, it's a stark reminder that the COI, for all its antiquated charm, played an important role – not just in helping to define an era of British pop culture, but in placing a gently protective arm around the vulnerable. The fact that it frequently did so with such inventiveness, imagination and sheer cinematic flair is perfectly encapsulated by this hugely evocative collection.

***The Best Of COI: Five Decades of Public Information Films* is available now from [www.bfi.org.uk](http://www.bfi.org.uk)**

**Visit the Haunted Generation website at [www.hauntedgeneration.co.uk](http://www.hauntedgeneration.co.uk), send details of new releases, or memories of the original "haunted" era to [hauntedgeneration@gmail.com](mailto:hauntedgeneration@gmail.com), or find me on Twitter... @bob\_fischer**

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## Under the dome

In 1991, a group of scientists volunteered to live inside a geodesic dome in the Arizona desert for two years. Now, a new documentary looks at this bold and sometimes controversial experiment.



### Spaceship Earth

Dir Matt Wolf, USA 2020  
On demand from 10 July

A timely reminder of the Biosphere 2 project, which saw a close-knit group of scientists and activists build an enormous geodesic dome in Arizona, filling it with flora and fauna to recreate the diverse biomes found on our planet, and sealing themselves within for two years.

The original motivation for the project was not to preserve nature on Earth but to lay down a blueprint for the future colonisation of other planets – to see whether humans could live this way on otherwise hostile worlds. Any sci-fi fan worth their salt will immediately recognise the similarity with Douglas Trumbull's 1972 film *Silent Running*, starring Bruce Dern, and the director acknowledges this early on. It's not just the basic premise that is shared: just as Dern's character was deeply committed to nature but slightly unhinged, it's fair to say that the personalities involved in the

### *It's fair to say that the personalities involved were unconventional*

Biosphere 2 were, shall we say, unconventional.

I shan't go into those personalities because the film's structure is such that it takes painstaking steps to establish them fully before we get anywhere near Biosphere 2. In fact, the scientists (or Biospherians as they insisted on calling themselves) don't get sealed in until nearly an hour has passed. But it is important to mention that the whole enterprise was the brainchild of John Allen, an intriguing character who seems to have led a million lives before he ended up in the Arizona desert: army engineer, union activist, civil rights activist, metallurgist, explorer, entrepreneur, avant-gardist and founder of a theatre

company. He was a father figure to many of his group and seemingly was able to get more out of them than they knew they were capable of. He inspired them to quite remarkable achievements but, for reasons that are never fully explained, he didn't enter the Biosphere himself and this is where the problems began to arise.

The Biosphere 2 project gradually began attracting more and more attention, more and more scrutiny, and, from certain areas, more and more criticism. The documentary shows that there were a number of people who wanted the project to fail: envious rivals (Allen secured massive funding from a Texan billionaire), scornful scientists and vested interests. This did not sit well with Allen who, alongside all his undoubted qualities, appears to be something of a control freak – almost playing God, as one of the scientists says in the film. He also became secretive about some of the goings-on, which compromised the integrity of the project.

I'm not a scientist, so I can't say whether this entire multi-million-dollar experiment produced any worthwhile data or results. One dissenting voice in the film says that the results were worthless, because there's no way they could ever be repeated and tested. But in many ways the film is less about to what extent Biosphere 2 advanced science and more about grand ambitions and having the desire and energy to make them reality. You'll need to check your cynicism at the door, but this is an engrossing and uplifting film about idealism.

Daniel King



### Code 404

Created by Tom Miller, Sam Myer, Daniel Peak, UK 2019  
Acorn Media, £19.99 (DVD)

Detective Inspector John Major (Daniel Mays, *Ashes to Ashes*) is shot dead while investigating a gang for the Met's Special Investigation Unit. A year later, his partner DI Roy Carver (Stephen Graham, *Line of Duty*) is visiting his memorial when Major suddenly appears. Carver says: "What the fuck!". May responds: "I hoped you'd say Jesus, so I could go, 'Nope, but we both came back from the dead.'" That, I'm afraid, is one of the funniest scenes in the whole six-part comedy.

Major has indeed been brought back from the dead. "He's 90 per cent human, 10 per cent non-organic matter", with AI augmentations that should make him a super-cop, but don't: not so much *Six Million Dollars* as a grubby fiver. The cop-coming-back-from-the-dead concept is so obviously reminiscent of *Randall & Hopkirk (Deceased)* that there's even a reference to that show. But there any resemblance ends. *Randall & Hopkirk* had gentle humour and lots of subtlety;



*Code 404* is as subtle as a smack in the gob. It's shouty, swearsy slapstick. When there is an occasional scene or set-up that is actually funny, it's drowned out by Major's OTT clumsiness. He's the comic idiot, screwing up in scene after scene. Carver is the straight man; he knows that Major might be switched off if he doesn't come up to scratch, so he spends his whole time covering up for his old mate. He's told to "monitor him for abnormal behaviour," but that's a full-time job. Major tries cramming a large bag into a small locker; he buries his face in a bag of coke; when asked for a villain's name he comes up with a string of celebrity chefs. But there's no real rationale behind this, and by the fourth or fifth time, let alone the 10th or 20th, that he does something stupid, the gag has long since lost its humour. He's given a software update, but it's in American, so he starts speaking in American cop show slang and saying "attorney", "diapers" and "hobo".

Major and Carver are sent out on jobs in classic "buddy cop" style. Major is fixated with finding the gangster who shot him, and with getting back together with his wife Kelly (Anna Maxwell Martin); the problem is that she and his best buddy Carver have got together, and are frantically trying to keep him from finding out. That's the set-up; the plot of each episode is just variations on the theme; mercifully, each one is only 25 minutes long. Only in the last episode, when Major gets a successful software upgrade and at last starts behaving like a real detective, do we get a storyline actually worth watching, with some great twists and turns. It was a long wait to get there.

The main actors are far too good for this embarrassing mess. The minor roles are fairly trivial. Rosie Cavaliero plays a detective chief superintendent with zero social skills or man-management skills. Amanda Payton plays the doctor/AI expert who reconstructed Major; her sole role is to be American geeky. Then there are a couple of cops (also DIs, but with the mentality of 12-year-olds) who delight in poking fun at Major's semi-bionic status. And why is he

called John Major? Who knows? It was obviously a deliberate decision, but it serves no purpose whatsoever.

Somehow this programme is getting a second series. Keep the actors; they're fine, especially Stephen Graham, who plays a great straight man against Daniel Mays, and the two leads do bounce off each other well. But I hope they find a writer who understands how to write comedy – because the saddest thing about *Code 404* is that it's only very occasionally funny.

David V Barrett



## Cursed Films

Dir Jay Cheel, US 2020  
Streaming on Shudder

Filmmaking is a laborious, lengthy, and costly undertaking. In the pre-digital age, in-camera special effects often involved unique risks: stunts, explosions, and other spectacles that resulted in injury, even death. Some films seemed to have attracted an inordinate degree of bad luck: creative struggles, hubris, weather, sickness, war, and economics, among other factors. However, when such bad luck affects a horror film, it takes on supernatural overtones. *Cursed Films*, an engaging yet problematic five-part documentary series, takes a fresh look at the most notorious of these horror films – *Poltergeist*, *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, *The Crow*, and *Twilight Zone: The Movie* – and attempts to answer the reasons why this horror-specific cursed film mystique exists. Written and directed by Jay Cheel (*How to Build a Time Machine*), it features new interviews with *Omen* director Richard Donner, *Exorcist* actress Linda Blair, *Poltergeist III* director Gary Sherman and actor Michael Berryman, and historian Mitch Horowitz, among others.

The first episode addresses the series of accidents that occurred on the set of *The Exorcist* (1973) as well as the hysteria and controversy surrounding the film's subject matter, a controversy cynically yet effectively exploited by the studio's marketing department, which only increased the

hype over alleged Satanic interference. The second episode looks at the tragic deaths of several cast members that occurred in the years following the release of *Poltergeist* (1982): Will Sampson, Julian Beck and, more sensationally, Dominique Dunne, murdered by her lover, and, tragically, 11-year-old Heather O'Rourke, who died of health complications during production of a sequel, *Poltergeist III* (1988). The third episode neatly summarises the various deaths and near-deaths that plagued the production of *The Omen* (1976), now the stuff of legend: two different planes carrying people associated with the films were struck by lightning; a plane crash; a car accident resulting in a decapitation that mimicked a similar accident in the film; and an IRA bombing that occurred close to the production. The documentary quite clearly draws a direct line between the film's subject matter, Satanism, and the film as invocation of demonic activity. Episode four treats the on-set death of actor Brandon Lee, son of martial arts legend Bruce Lee, during filming of *The Crow* (1992), which resulted from budgetary constraints that led to an inexperienced crew member neglecting to appropriately clear a blank-firing gun, an event that eerily repeated a similar, fictional scene from one of Bruce Lee's films. The final episode recounts the tragic disaster in the John Landis-directed segment of *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983), in which actor Vic Morrow and two child actors were decapitated by the blades of a helicopter downed by explosives detonated too close to its flight path.

To his credit, Cheel attempts to straddle the line between support and critique, if not outright rejection, of the so-called curse. Predictably, the occultists and exorcists interviewed ascribe to the former thesis, while those involved in the actual production generally reject it. If the filmmakers intended to balance this argument between the two, they fail miserably; the true believers generally come across as cranks, while the cast and crew members offer sober,

introspective, and heartfelt analyses of their actual, lived experiences on-set and off. As a result, they offer far more convincing and compelling arguments. Cheel regrettably pads already brief episodes with pointless forays into demonological nonsense; for example, in *The Exorcist* episode we spend too much screen time with a blatantly charlatan real-life exorcist, and in *The Omen* episode are forced to visit some decidedly humourless black magicians. For the *Poltergeist* episode we take a tour of a horror memorabilia collector's living room, and get to stand outside the actual *Poltergeist* house and talk with a neighbour. And just what are stuntman and slasher actor Kane Hodder and Troma founder Lloyd Kaufman doing in the *Twilight Zone* episode, anyway?

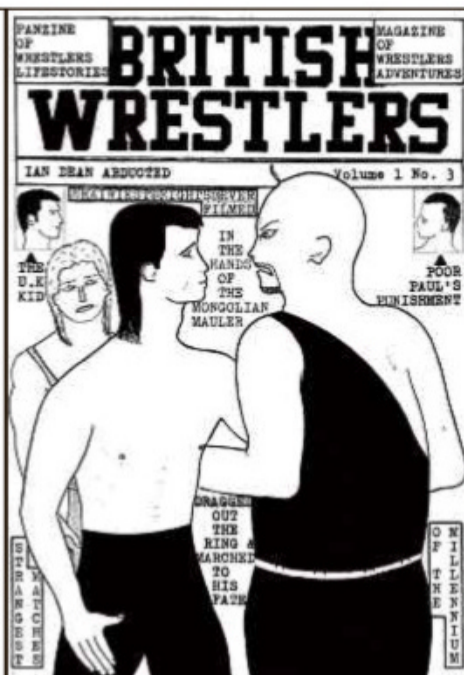
And yet, interspersed among these rambling tangents and digressions, and copious film clips, are valuable insights provided by historians and academics in the horror field. Most impressive, however, are a handful of utterly compelling moments of human tragedy: director Gary Sherman's account of O'Rourke's death and his subsequent decision not to complete the film, overruled by studio executives; make-up artist Lance Anderson's heartfelt expression of loss at the untimely death of Brandon Lee; and production designer Richard Sawyer's lifelong trauma that resulted from perceived culpability for the horrific helicopter accident on the set of *Twilight Zone*, which ended three innocent lives and his movie career. These true-life circumstances are in fact the very themes that these films attempt to depict: the violence, senselessness, and suddenness of human mortality, the strange synchronicities of coincidence, and its ultimate meaninglessness. Our grief seems to be the only palliative, how through shared experience and acceptance of the inevitable we somehow manage to find among the overwhelming sense of loss and futility some kind of temporary peace.

Eric Hoffman



British wrestling  
always had a  
dark side.  
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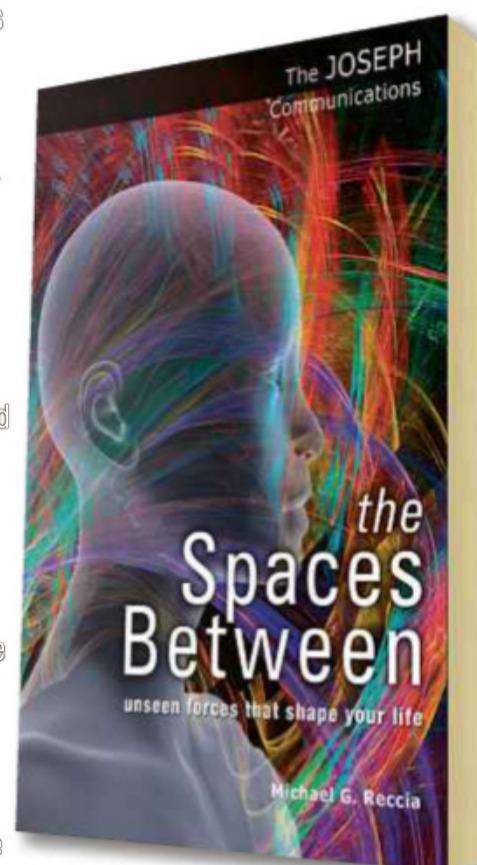
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# LETTERS

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## Soil test – and mice

Lisa Gledhill [FT392:52] notes the idea of sitting bare-arsed on the soil to test the temperature. This was mentioned by Gail Duff (*Country Wisdom* Pan Books, 1979) as a test of whether or not it was safe to sow barley. I have had a long-time interest in the folklore of barley, but I have never found an earlier mention of this test. Does anyone out there know an earlier reference? It does feel like a leg-pull, but then entertainment was more limited in times past!

Stefan Badham [FT392:75] describes a mouse disappearing from a ventilated cardboard box in a cupboard under the stairs. Back in the days when my interests included food hygiene, the textbooks all noted that an adult mouse could squeeze through any hole of 6mm or greater – about the cross-section of a pencil. Videos online illustrate the point. A young mouse could probably get through an even smaller hole, as could an adult if the edge of the hole had some flexibility.

**Ron Gardner**

*Upton Snodsbury, Worcestershire*

## Pareidolia

In a recent article [FT388:43], I mentioned the case of two women who reportedly abandoned a camping trip in 2014 after having some ghostly experiences in Leigh Woods outside Bristol. The next day, one of them flicked through photographs taken the previous night and noticed an image of what she assumed was a figure watching them. To me, the supposed figure is amorphous, but Tony Sandy [FT393:74] contends that it resembles a man in a cap, demonstrating his point by drawing a line around the supposed ‘man’. I feel this is merely a case of pareidolia: perceiving something meaningful in a random or ambiguous stimulus array.

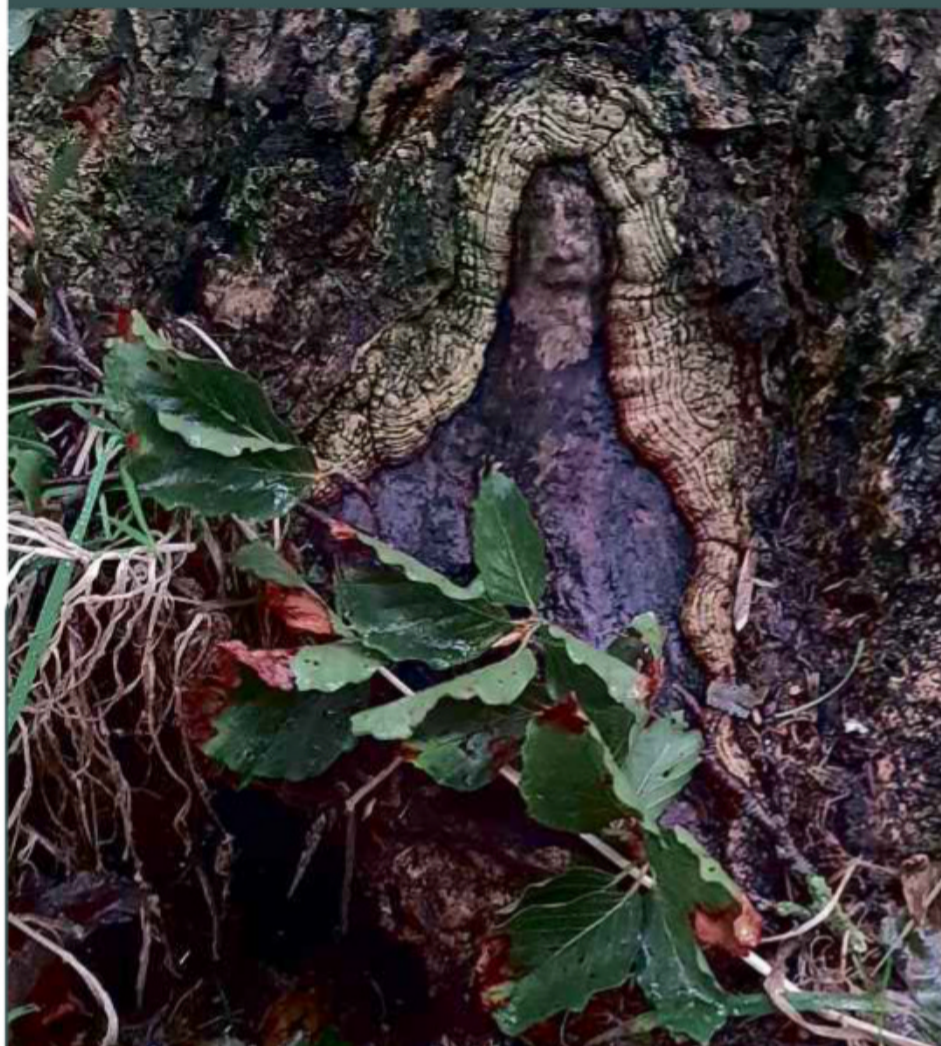
**Peter McCue**

*By email*

## Independence

I really must object to Tony Sandy’s characterisation of the Scottish National Party [FT392:72]. As a long-term

## SIMULACRA CORNER



Chris Macleod photographed this tree in the Castle Grounds, Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides. He thought it might portray the Blessed Virgin Mary... “or is it a Hindu Holy man or perhaps a Hebridean fairy?”

*We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 66598, London N11 9EN or to sieveking@forteanimes.com.*

Edinburgh resident who still has her original Essex accent, I don’t recognise the portrait he paints of anti-Englishness and the SNP. There is no comparison with Trump and Brexit. In the course of several decades, I can count on the fingers of one hand the anti-English remarks made to me and many English people who live happily in Scotland and feel very welcome.

**Anne Keane**

*Edinburgh*

## The Miramon

Ulrich Magin rightly drew attention to the enormous potential of Google Books for breakthroughs in longstanding fortean puzzles with a historical component

[FT389:53]. Unfortunately, that resource failed him in his quest to identify a source for the claim that the vessel *Miramon* had been a victim of the Bermuda Triangle in 1884: “I encountered not a single reference in any contemporary newspaper or in any book that did not deal with the Triangle.” Inspired to have a go myself, I was delighted to discover the following passage in a biography of Thornton A Jenkins (1811-1893), an American Navy officer: “Present at the capture of the armed vessels ‘Miramon’ and ‘Marquis of Havana’, off Vera Cruz, and under the walls of that city and the Fort of St. Juan de Ulloa, during the siege and bombardment by the insurgent forces of Gen. Miramon. Charged

with conveying the prizes ‘Miramon’ and ‘Marquis of Havana’ and transporting their crew and passengers as prisoners to New Orleans.” Source: the entry ‘Jenkins, Thornton A.’ on p. 405 of LR Hamersly (ed.), *A Naval Encyclopædia: Comprising a Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases; Biographical Notices, and Records of Naval Officers; Special Articles on Naval Art and Science, Written Expressly for this Work by Officers and Others of Recognized Authority in the Branches Treated by Them. Together with Descriptions of the Principal Naval Stations and Seaports of the World* (Philadelphia: LR Hamersly & Co., 1884). No mention of a mystery, but perhaps some new clues can be distilled from the above information, which couldn’t be more contemporary.

**Marinus van der Sluijs**

*By email*

## Vanishings Down Under

I was interested in the feature about the Guyra poltergeist [FT388:32-36]. I know that New South Wales town well; it’s near Armidale, where I was in 1963-65. When I was there, the Guyra soccer team captain, a Scot named Lew Cowperthwaite, disappeared, never to be seen again. In 1967, Australian PM Harold Holt also vanished without trace while swimming off Cheviot Beach, Victoria. Should this make us wonder...?

**Barry Baldwin**

*Calgary, Canada*

## Birmingham City Curse

Reading Alan Murdie’s column [FT393:18-21] reminded me of an article I read in a football magazine in the 1990s. Then Birmingham City manager, Barry Fry, was aware of the alleged curse on the team’s ground and, having not won a game for three months, decided to get some advice on taking precautions just in case the curse was real.

He spoke with a local member of the travelling community

# LETTERS

and was told to pee in all four corners, which he duly did.

They won seven of the next 10 matches, but were still relegated. I found an article on a local press website: [www.birminghammail.co.uk/sport/football/football-news/barry-fry-birmingham-city-leak-13062683](http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/sport/football/football-news/barry-fry-birmingham-city-leak-13062683).

**John Wilding**  
East Yorkshire

## Signals and Noise

I was a little disappointed with David Hambling's article on 5G ['Signals and noise', FT393:16]. I felt it lacked the spirit of scepticism that I admire so much in *FT* and instead followed the familiar line of "Everything's fine, nothing to see here".

While recent and highly publicised crackpot conspiracy theories of 5G masts (somehow) transmitting Covid-19 are laughable, I fear they run the risk of nullifying any legitimate concerns about the network's safety.

In September 2017, approximately 200 scientists from 36 countries jointly appealed to the European Commission to issue a moratorium on the roll-out of 5G until the health hazards were independently assessed (and further campaigning has stalled the installation process in Brussels itself, the seat of the EU). As of 18 May, the appeal has 377 signatories, all of them scientists and medical doctors.

Naturally, scientists have differing opinions on every subject, but as yet there are no universally acknowledged 'safe parameters' for EMF exposure, so little is known about its long-term effects on living organisms. In fact, in 2011, the World Health Organisation designated all radio frequency radiation a group B carcinogen, meaning that it *may* cause cancer in humans. This is not to mention the effects it may have on more sensitive organisms like honey-bees, where the slightest changes in parameters have a marked impact on reproduction and general function.

5G operates on average between 30-90 GHz on the EMF spectrum, whereas 4G has only



## Plague masks

Re the person in Hellesdon, Norfolk, walking around wearing a 17th century plague mask [FT393:4, 394:28]: a woman has been seen here on Dartmoor walking her cat while wearing such an outfit. Surely sensible PPE, considering?

**Lorna Stroup Nilsson**  
Princetown, Devon

operated up to 5GHz (and often under 3). This is still in the same domestic bandwidth as a microwave oven (which causes a notable heating effect, of course), but a microwave combines this with a very short range of a few centimetres and a power output of around 800 watts, while a good Wi-Fi signal might only operate on 1-2 watts.

So while I'm not suggesting that 5G will be anywhere near as dangerous as an unshielded microwave, it is only capable of travelling shorter distances than 3G or 4G signals and cannot penetrate long established trees. This is why trees are sadly being felled and not, as suggested by some conspiracy theorists, because 5G kills them.

All this means that a greater number of masts are required for full coverage. (Early suggestions ranged from one mast for every two houses) and this, combined with the already existing bandwidths and the

increase in smart devices to be served by the network, would all contribute to the rise in EM fields. I'm sure that most forteen enthusiasts are familiar with the investigation of EMF impacts on paranormal phenomena, so how will this affect us? Will we hear of more ghost sightings with the rollout of 5G? Or will this whole furore, in 100 years' time, be compared to Victorian fears that the increasing speed of rail travel would injure passengers and cause suffocation or insanity? Only time will tell.

5G may not pose any more risk, and potentially much less of a risk, than poor air quality or chemical additives in food or cosmetics, but I would welcome more independent research on the subject before it is wholly embraced. Dismissing all concerns out of hand because some are demonstrably unfounded is just complacent.

**Jo Harlow**  
Ditton, Kent

I read David Hambling's article on 5G with much interest – but I feel that there are some salient points to be made concerning non-ionising RF radiation and environmental health. I should point out that I do not sympathise with, or in any way condone, criminal activity against 5G or any other RF installation.

He states: "Worries about the health effects of stray electromagnetic radiation predate the current pandemic... studies [since 1979] have failed to find a connection" – referring here to power lines. In fact, googling "Effect of 5G radiation on living tissue" brings up a host of titles including "We have no reason to believe 5G is safe" by Joel Moskowitz in *Scientific American* (17 Oct 2019). 5G RF waves are determined to be non-ionising, too weak to split DNA and protein molecules, and hence regarded as non-carcinogenic. But what else could they do? Cancer isn't the only disease that could be caused. Googling "Effect of non-ionising radiation on protein folding" brings up (among others) "Changes in cellular proteins due to environmental non-ionising radiation. 1. Heat shock proteins". The article concludes that there is an effect on protein, at least in some cases (and heat shock alters protein folding).

Hambling goes on to mention "suspicion of mainstream medicine and distrust of the scientific establishment." The introduction of diamorphine (marketed as a treatment for morphine addiction), aspirin (recommended in catastrophic overdose for treatment of Spanish 'Flu by none other than the US Surgeon General), barbiturates, the Thalidomide tragedy, benzodiazepine derivatives, some antidepressants and many NSAIDs (causing cardiac problems), overenthusiastic lobotomy, tonsillectomy and ECT have all gone to undermine that trust.

Hambling mentions clusters, which may or may not be statistically significant. In his book *Beyond the Rainbow*, Arthur Firstenberg mentions a small but to my mind very significant cluster of the deterioration in health of some of the early radio



pioneers. Bell and Edison were both diabetic. Marconi and his wife (pregnant at the time) were exposed to radiation from a powerful transmitter. Marconi became seriously ill, and his wife gave birth to a child that lived for only a few weeks. Other radio pioneers suffered similarly.

I do not claim that “5G caused Coronavirus or that it causes Covid-19” – but to go on from there to claim that it (and other non-ionising radiation) cannot be implicated *at all* is somewhat simplistic. Since it seems that RF radiation can modify protein, it could be that it alters the permeability of cell walls, thereby facilitating the ingress of a virus. We are faced with not only a pandemic of Covid-19 but also with a pandemic of diabetes, obesity and depression, all of which Firstenberg links with non-ionising RF. It is also interesting to note that diabetes and obesity are serious complicating factors in Covid-19 infection.

We have to come to terms with the environmental health problems presented by the mobile phone system, much as we have had to come to terms with the environmental effects of motor vehicles (Tetraethyl Lead anyone? Not any more, thank you). And it is not only individual mobile phones and masts. Starlink will have in the ambit of 12,000 satellites broadcasting about 9MW, corresponding to about 6.3W/sq mile of Earth’s surface. Compare this to the 5W of a modern low energy light bulb and it doesn’t look like much. But let’s not forget that this goes on 24/7/365 and eventually down the generations. Anyone who doubts the effect of tiny forces acting over (admittedly geological) time needs to come to Somerset (in more convivial times) and visit Cheddar Caves and Wookey Hole. Let’s be true forteans and be sceptical about the scepticism. We might find out something really interesting.

**Brian Perry**

*Chilton Polden, Somerset*

## Coronavirus folklore

Simon Young asks for coronavirus-related folklore [FT391:29, 392:31]. Some of the following

were told to me orally, others come from social media. The panic buying of toilet paper in Japan was allegedly caused by the rumour that most Japanese toilet roll is made in Chinese factories, so a disruption in the supply chain was believed to be imminent. This seems to reflect the contemporary ignorance of consumers as to where all our stuff actually comes from. Previous outbreaks of pneumonia in China were clustered around American military bases (are there any in China?). I also heard rumours that the virus had been genetically engineered by the Chinese military as early as 29 March. Clear bogeyman-blaming. On Facebook in France someone shared the demonstrably false claim that major pandemics always break out in years ending in 20 (plague in 1720, cholera in 1820, Spanish Flu in 1920, etc.). Apophenia.

The attacks on 5G masts have been by far the most interesting results of coronavirus rumour so far, and they are actually a latter-day example of a long-running interplay between technology, folklore, magical thinking and cultural anxiety. In the 19th century, as the telegraph spread around the world, it was the focus of dark rumour and superstition. In 1869 an Englishman named Jencken was attacked by a mob in Spain. The locals believed that he was a vampire who was stealing children and using their fat to repair the telegraph wires. This was reported in the *Times* (14 Aug 1869) as well as in other papers.

Technology journals from the 1870s to the early 1900s frequently reported the difficulty of maintaining telegraph wires in rural China. Locals allegedly chopped down the poles because of their “bad feng shui”. A book by the Rev TM Morris, *A Winter in North China* (1892), claims that Chinese peasants believed a human head was buried under each telegraph pole by the foreign engineers as a kind of foundation sacrifice (p.233). Similarly in Japan, the telegraph was at first said to be powered by Christian blood sacrifice rituals – see *Tokyo from Edo to Showa 1867-1989* (2010) by Edward Seidensticker,

p.64).

What does all this have to do with coronavirus? Well, at the time of these Chinese and Japanese rumours, both countries were experiencing the beginnings of westernisation. There would have been high levels of anxiety and suspicion of incomers throughout society and the telegraph, newly introduced from abroad, became a kind of magnet for xenophobic rumour.

Now it is 2020. Around the time of the virus’s first stirrings we were also hearing rather a lot about 5G and the perceived dangers of letting the Chinese company Huawei have any hand in British communications. Were these dangers and the threat of the virus conflated, either through magical thinking or deliberately by those with vested interests? Let’s not forget that many MPs are rather nervous about Huawei. Are Britons now burning down 5G phone towers because they fear perfidious China and its dark powers just as 19th century Chinese peasants attacked and feared the weird totems of the foreign devils? Plus ça change.

**Lewis JW Hurst**

*Tokyo, Japan*

## Two mysteries

It is rewarding to see that readers undertake follow-up investigations on some of the first and second-hand ‘real-life’ testimonies that I have quoted in *Fortean Times*. Alistair Moffatt and Roger J Morgan proposed potential solutions to experiences I have described, viz. the ‘Phantom’ Concorde [FT382:39, 391:74] and The Bride on the Bridge [FT389:42-47, 391:72]. I contacted the witnesses and gave them the details of the suggested explanations. I set out their responses below. ‘Len Chester’ highlighted that he has been interested in – and been around – very large model aircraft for a long time. No matter how well made such models may be in duplicating the

look of the real thing, they do have a different ‘feel’ in how you discern them when flying. He said that this is hard to explain, but easier to understand when you see it yourself; he guesses that it must be something to do with the weight or mass that is missing from the model compared to the real aeroplane. What was seen on the day was undoubtedly ‘1:1 scale!’ As he says: “It was bloody big and it was near!” He once saw a video of a 2/3 size replica WWI aircraft (he thinks it was a Fokker Tri-plane) and it was immediately possible to tell that it was not a full-size one.

Thinking back again to his experience, he supposes that he and his parents should have seen the aeroplane continue its climb, despite being lost to bordering trees – but they didn’t; it just wasn’t to be seen anymore, which of course was very odd. They had had the distinct impression that it had just lifted off, with the nose only slightly higher than its tail. Regarding the reference to Al Ogilvy’s suggestion [FT386:74] of a misidentified Vulcan bomber, Len emphasised that whatever he saw it was not a Vulcan, which is a very different-looking aeroplane to a Concorde. The only real similarity is the presence of back wings, and a Vulcan would probably have some camouflage painting, which most certainly was not the case – the aeroplane observed was definitely white.

*continued on page 74*



PETER KING

# IT HAPPENED TO ME...

First-hand accounts of strange experiences from *FT* readers

## The rabbit collectors

Saturday, 23 May 1998 was a very hot day, sticky and muggy. It was my regular Saturday ritual, weather permitting, to walk the 10 miles [16km], there and back, to the village of Hennock, a steep and winding climb from my home in Chudleigh, Devon, to place flowers on my parents' grave. I left home at 5.50pm, a few hours later than usual, to benefit from the cooler air. I reached Hennock just after eight and sat on the churchyard seat for a while, watching the swifts busy building their nests in the church tower. I set off for home at about 8.30pm. A cooling breeze had sprung up, making it feel much more comfortable.

About three-quarters of a mile out of Hennock, I turned to look back up the hill and admire one of the most spectacular sunsets I had ever seen in all my 50-odd years. It was as if the sky was on fire; it felt very eerie. I can't recall ever hearing a silence as loud as it was that evening. I swear that if someone had dropped a pin I would have heard it.

By 9.40pm I had reached the top of Farley Mill Road, a quiet little back road leading to Chudleigh. Glancing to my right, I spotted a row of pale yellow lights coming out of the west. At first I thought it might be a helicopter, but there was no sound. As the lights got closer, I saw they were on a very large V-shaped craft, which appeared dark grey in the twilight. When this was almost directly overhead, I spotted a smaller, circular craft, with the same pale yellow lights. I assumed it had emerged from the much larger craft; it had happened so quickly I just couldn't tell. The larger craft then zoomed off at high speed towards the Haldon Hills, a few miles outside Exeter. I couldn't believe what I was seeing; my palms were sweaty and my throat dry. I stood there as if transfixed.

The circular craft hovered



## I am unable to find the spot where I had the accident

above me for what seemed an age, and then began to descend. A large gap in the hedge a few feet away from me was blocked with a couple of sheets of rusty corrugated iron. I dived into the gap and crouched down low. The sheets of galvanised iron had a couple of large holes, through which I could observe what was going on. The craft landed in the field no more than 15 yards away. There was a sickening droning sound. By the eerie yellowish light coming from the craft, I could see rabbits lying nearby. I couldn't tell whether they were dead or merely stunned.

Suddenly I saw two greyish-white figures about four and a half feet [137cm] tall. I can only presume they had disembarked from the other side of the craft, as I could see no opening in the side facing me. The figures reminded me of concentration camp victims seen in newsreels at the end of WWII, except that their heads were very large in proportion to their bodies. I could see no clothing on them whatsoever.

One of the figures was carrying a bag and the other had

what looked like a metal rod. While one collected rabbits and put them in the bag, the other was busy pushing the rod into the ground and then retrieving it. They then disappeared behind the craft, which soon began to rise slowly. When it was about 60ft [18m] up, it zoomed off at great speed towards the Haldon Hills, just like the V-shaped craft. I don't think I have ever walked the last mile home faster.

Six weeks later, I was still getting awful flashbacks. I would wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. I kept getting terrible headaches; I don't think I had suffered more than half a dozen headaches in my whole life up until then.

**David WE Manley**  
Chudleigh, Devon

Editor's note: This account was sent to Fortean Towers in 1998, and only recently came to light.

## Crash mystery

On the 14 July 2011, I set off on my Royal Enfield Bullet motorcycle from home in North Tyneside for a day's riding. Some hours later I stopped at the famous Hartside Cafe, near Alston in Cumbria (pictured above), for a bite to eat. My travels then took me on the B6276, a wonderful motorcycling road between Brough,

Cumbria, and Middleton in Teesdale, Co Durham. As I approached a gentle right-hand bend about halfway between these towns, I suddenly found my bike at a right angle to the direction of the road (for no reason) and propelled into a wide grassy run-off space. I awoke from my concussion with an elderly Scottish lady asking how I was. Sometime after, two ambulances arrived to take me to A&E – one from Penrith, the other from Darlington. With broken ribs, impact wounds on my face, leg and arms I was patched up at Darlington's Memorial Hospital. The bike was written off, but gladly I wasn't, although my injuries still pain me nine years later.

A few weeks after the accident, I decided to use Google street view to recount my final ride on the B6276. (The police record of the accident confirms the road). But no matter how many times I have virtually ridden the road, I am unable to find the spot where I had the accident. I have since driven my car along this road and there is no point that remotely matches my vivid recollection of the accident site, nor have I ever discovered a likely cause for such a strange unexplained accident.

**Rob McGinley**  
Wallsend, North Tyneside

## Wandsworth haunting

My husband grew up in a big old Victorian house right on the edge of Wandsworth Common in southwest London. It was his family home, bought by his grandfather when they had been bombed out of Fulham during the Blitz. His mum had grown up there too, remaining in her childhood home with her husband and children. Up until my in-laws moved out in 2007, we used to go back there regularly to visit. We'd stay over for the night, usually in my husband's old bedroom at

the back of the house. Though the house was on a busy road, the bedrooms were absolutely pitch black at night. You could barely see your hand in front of you, unusual for an area soaked in 'urban glow'. It was a cold, dark and not particularly friendly house, especially on the top floors. It had been split into flats in the 1950s and 1960s when people took in lodgers, and was in need of some TLC. There was a freezing cold loo right opposite the bedroom across a little landing and, for whatever reason, I would always "hold it in" till the morning. No one popped to the loo in the middle of the night.

One evening in 2005, we had been for dinner with the in-laws and decided to stay over, so we went to bed in the usual bedroom. I was pregnant with my first child, so can confidently say no wine had been consumed that evening. After a short snooze, I was woken by my husband tossing, turning, mumbling and groaning. I sat up, now wide awake, and saw a little shadowy figure, crouched and leaning over him. It was mischievous and malevolent, right in his face, tormenting him in his sleep. I've already mentioned the darkness in the room, but this nasty little thing was blacker than black. It had a human form, but was made up of what I can only describe as a buzzing black energy.

You would think I would have been terrified, judging by my fear of going to the loo in that house, but I felt a strange calm. I swatted at it, like you would at a swarm of flies. Then it kind of dissipated and I did the only thing I knew, which was to say the Lord's Prayer very loudly. After that my still-sleeping husband let out a shiver and said in his sleep, "Ooh, that was weird", before promptly turning over and resuming a blissful slumber.

The following morning at breakfast, my mother-in-law politely enquired about the night's sleep, so I told her what had happened, expecting a laugh or a roll of the eyes, but she didn't bat an eyelid. "Oh yes," She said. "I've always said there was something on that landing." She then went on to tell various tales of seeing monk's feet walking down invis-



ible steps in other parts of the house when she was a child. She also said the bedroom we stayed in used to be a kitchen in the 1950s when they had lodgers, and the lodger had committed suicide, either by hanging or in a gas oven. When our baby girl stayed there, the grandparents put her down in a cot in that same bedroom, and unusually for my good little girl, she would scream blue murder till she was taken out of the room. Thankfully, they've now moved, but I often wonder if the shadowy inhabitants are still there.

**Michelle S—**  
*Tunbridge Wells, Kent*

## Sizing up

I had a couple of minor forteen incidents as I walked the dog on 28 August 2017. As I went past the school that bounds the field of my usual walk, I started wondering whether to risk not taking a jacket (very British). At that exact moment another dog walker greeted me with "Lovely day, no need for a coat!" as if answering my unspoken question. On the way back past the school I saw a huge black and white cat prowling, stalking some prey, the other side of the fence. It was not ABC-sized, just very much larger than average, say the size of a small dog. Except as I approached and walked past it, it wasn't – it was actually not much bigger than a kitten, probably only a year or so old. When I had seen it initially I had plenty of reference points, fence, trees, school with which to gauge size, but still had greatly exag-

gerated it subconsciously. I wonder if we are evolutionarily pre-programmed to see the hunting attitudes of a feline predator as alerting us to a personal threat, and the size discrepancy is to rack up the importance? This could explain why there are a number of ABC sightings where a normally reliable witness has demonstrably misidentified a moggy as something more dangerous.

**Graeme Kenna**  
*Wallasey, Merseyside*

## Shrank to a point

I relate the following dreams because of a possible ghost connection, although both could be described as merely hypnopompic episodes rather than manifestations from the *Twilight Zone*. The first took place in an apartment on the top floor of an old Victorian house in Denver, Colorado. A rather comical figure, a man with a bulbous nose and dark complexion, who wore baggy brown slacks and a pink corduroy jacket, was rummaging through some items from my pockets that (as in reality) had been left on the top of the bureau next to my bed. This caused me to awaken, and to shout at the man, who seemed in waking reality still to be there. Immediately, the dream figure, or perhaps ghost, departed – but in a quite unusual fashion. He, or it, shrank down to a point and disappeared, as if being sucked through a pin-hole into another dimension. The next dream (how much later is uncertain) happened in a rental cottage, one of several behind the home of an elderly

couple in Phoenix, Arizona. This time, there appeared in the dream a man, who looked to be in his thirties, had a crew cut, and wore cheap slacks and a sweater. He was kneeling on my chest and trying to strangle me, which of course caused me to awaken. Again upon my awakening the figure was still present, causing me to shout, as in the previous experience, that he should be gone. Again, this departure occurred just as before – the ghost or dream figure shrank to a point and disappeared as if being sucked back into whatever realm (whether purely dream or somehow real) it had come from.

**Richard Porter**  
*Denver, Colorado*

## Please continue to hold...

As I came round after an operation for womb cancer, strange images began to fill my mind... a white wolf nuzzling my hand... a snowy landscape... It felt as if my body was slowly beginning to turn clockwise on the bed, but that would have been impossible, as there were leg pumps attached. Then I was outside in the cool, fresh air, floating freely.

I'd had OBEs before, but not since I was a child. An immense feeling of love, empathy and wisdom enveloped me – and I realised it was coming from a nearby *pigeon*! (It didn't seem at all crazy.) I could hear music playing, something that seemed to be on a loop. As I tried to place it, a female voice began to speak. The words were like those you'd hear while waiting on the phone at the doctors' or dentists' surgery: "Your call is important to us. Please continue to hold".

Back home, the 'jingle' was still going round my mind. I picked it out on the piano and my son transcribed it and did a recording for me. I have no idea why four minutes seemed so significant, I just know that somehow it does. If anyone would like to hear it, it's on YouTube: "Four minutes/Please continue to hold". I'm curious to know if anyone has had a similar experience.

**Linda Hardy**  
*Wellingborough, Northants*

continued from page 71

I contacted Miss W of Formby about Roger's suggestion that the location of her experience was Hug Bridge, over the River Dane, on the A523, with the possibility that the pub was the Queen's Arms at Bosley (which is now closed). I had shared a copy of my article with her and she was pleased with what was written, and how it was written, but she added a few comments, one of which was a correction: they didn't look over the bridge (as I had stated), they stopped at the bottom of the bridge and ran to the side of the canal/river and walked along the path calling out. She added that when she and Chris entered the pub, people were talking, and they only stopped when Miss W said that she thought that they had killed someone.

She then added a detail that had not come up in our previous correspondence. This was that the husband of the (ghost) bride was sitting at the end of the bar. He said that he had also seen his wife a few years after her death: he had stood by the bridge and could see his wife walking to the bridge, just as she did on their wedding night; he had then seen a car go past and she fell into the water; the people got out of their car thinking they had hit her; and he had to go over to them and explain the situation to them.

The landlady of the pub said that what was also odd was that the village was very small with no shops, and no one ever drove down the road to it, apart from the people who lived there. Yet it is as if every year someone always seems drawn to drive down that road; and the villagers wait for someone to come into the pub to say that they have hit someone on the bridge.

So, if anything, the weirdness of the event goes up another notch or two. I have little doubt of Miss W's sincerity – she says that she has tried really hard to remember as much detail as she can, but it was a long time ago, and she has little if any contact with her friends who were with

her that day (one is now in Gloucestershire and the other two are in Australia). She has emphasised that after that night she had really bad nightmares and then had related treatment. Standing back, it is clear that wherever the episode took place, it was not at Hug Bridge, which is on a trunk road with a steady flow of traffic passing at high speeds (I have travelled that road many times). Nevertheless, top marks to Roger Morgan for the suggestion – based on the information in my article Hug Bridge is a very plausible location.

My thanks again to your correspondents. I very much welcome their taking the time and effort to try and find rational explanations for the puzzling phenomena.

**Rob Gandy**

*By email*

## Ball lightning bites Gonzo

In *Generation of Swine* (Summit, 1988, p.124), political observer and satirist Hunter S Thompson (pictured above) recounts an experience with ball lightning he had near his favourite local bar in the Colorado Rockies. A stranger arrived trying to sell an Italian motorcycle, and found himself in a bet for \$10,000 over a road race pitting his machine against a jeep. A man called Tex had just agreed to hold the cash when...

"...the whole world exploded with a boom and a flash that blew us all sideways. Cromwell's jeep turned blue like a gas bomb, and then fell on top of the motorcycle, sending up a cloud of nasty electrical smoke.

"We were all knocked stupid. The next sound I remember hearing was a woman screeching, 'Please, Tex – don't die.' And then I felt myself being dragged across the road by people I didn't recognize. There was a smell of burning hair all around us, and I heard voices talking about 'oxygen' and 'heart failure' and 'burned like a human cinder.'

"No money changed hands



that day, and we never saw the man from Miami again. Several days later I went back to the tavern and heard more or less what happened. We were whacked by a huge blue ball of lightning that bounced once in the parking lot and then rolled down the road about 200 feet before it exploded in the creek.

"Tex lived, but his heart was like a small lump of charcoal and his face shrivelled up like a raisin. A doctor in Phoenix said his body was about 400 years old, and if he ever bumped up against anything solid he would probably break like cheap glass.

"I never saw him again. His family put him in a rural hotel somewhere in Arizona, where he remained helpless for whatever remained of his life.

"There is still a big crater in the parking lot across the road from the Woody Creek Tavern, with a crust of black ash on its edges and a pool of stagnant water in the bottom... I have not been back there since I quit work and moved north, for professional reasons. [June 2, 1986]"

This sounds like another case of partial "spontaneous" human combustion, with plenty of witnesses. See also 'Jack Angel, SHC Survivor' [FT39:12-15].

**Selby Anderson**

*Helotes, Texas*

## Flat Earthers

I feel that Gordon Rutter [FT393:42-45] did not really bring out the implications of what the Flat Earther Richard Birkett said: "Why do we correlate what we see with other planets to our planet?" If other planets are spherical and the Earth is flat, that makes Earth different – i.e.

special. Samuel Rowbotham, of course, went further and claimed that the Sun "made circuits of the Earth in a spiral pattern." If the Earth is flat, common sense would suggest that Rowbotham was right. In other words, belief in a Flat Earth overthrows the Copernican revolution and restores the Earth to the centre of things (rather than a trivial little planet in a far-flung spiral arm of the galaxy). This enables Flat Earthers to feel that our world, and in consequence the human race, are really important. Which is reassuring for them – wouldn't you rather be part of something central and important? We cannot make sense of this belief unless we acknowledge the psychological needs that drive it. For my part, I can live with being peripheral and unimportant.

**Martin Jenkins**

*London*

It occurs to me that there is evidence against a Flat Earth that can't be explained away by NASA conspiracies or optical illusions. In every Flat Earth model I have seen, the Sun and Moon orbit a few thousand miles above the disc of the Earth, and within its limits. This has two consequences: the Moon must be much nearer (and appear much larger) when it is overhead than when it is low down in the sky; and neither Sun nor Moon can ever appear to go below an ocean horizon. Anyone who has tried out a new telephoto lens on the Moon (like we all do) knows that the first is wrong; and anyone who has spent time on a west coast knows that the second is wrong.

**David Evans**

*By email*

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# PECULIAR POSTCARDS



**JAN BONDESON** shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past features the man who claimed to be Britain's oldest clown and his performing dogs

## 7. JAMES DOUGHTY, THE OLDEST CLOWN

James Ward Doughty was born at the Crown Inn, Market Place, Bristol, on 28 August 1818. He attended two boarding schools, but ran away from them both and absconded from home at the age of 13 to join a travelling circus. He made his debut as an actor at the Theatre Royal, Devonport, playing Gimbo in *The Illustrious Stranger*. He then became an actor in London, enjoying success as Rosencrantz in *Hamlet* and specialising in mock electioneering speeches and comic readings from Shakespeare. He succeeded the celebrated clown Joseph Grimaldi at Drury Lane and proved extremely popular in the Metropolitan entertainment world for many years. He toured extensively with various circuses and theatrical troupes, and was a hit in Dublin.

Doughty had a performing dog named 'Joe', who was very good at 'playing dead', the comatose canine not reacting in any way until Doughty exclaimed: "Joe, here is a policeman!" His successes with Joe inspired Doughty to set up a troupe of performing dogs, which joined him on tour for many years to come. In 1890, he performed before Queen Victoria at Osborne House, receiving a letter of thanks from Her Majesty.

In his old age, Doughty moved to Brighton with his second wife Margaret, who was 20 years his junior. He liked giving shows with his troupe of dogs on West Pier, dressed up as a clown just like in the old days. In 1905, when he was 87 years old and still performing, he had a postcard printed to celebrate his career as Britain's



CHRONICLE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

## James Doughty,

The oldest living ACTOR & CLOWN  
now working on the WEST PIER,  
BRIGHTON.

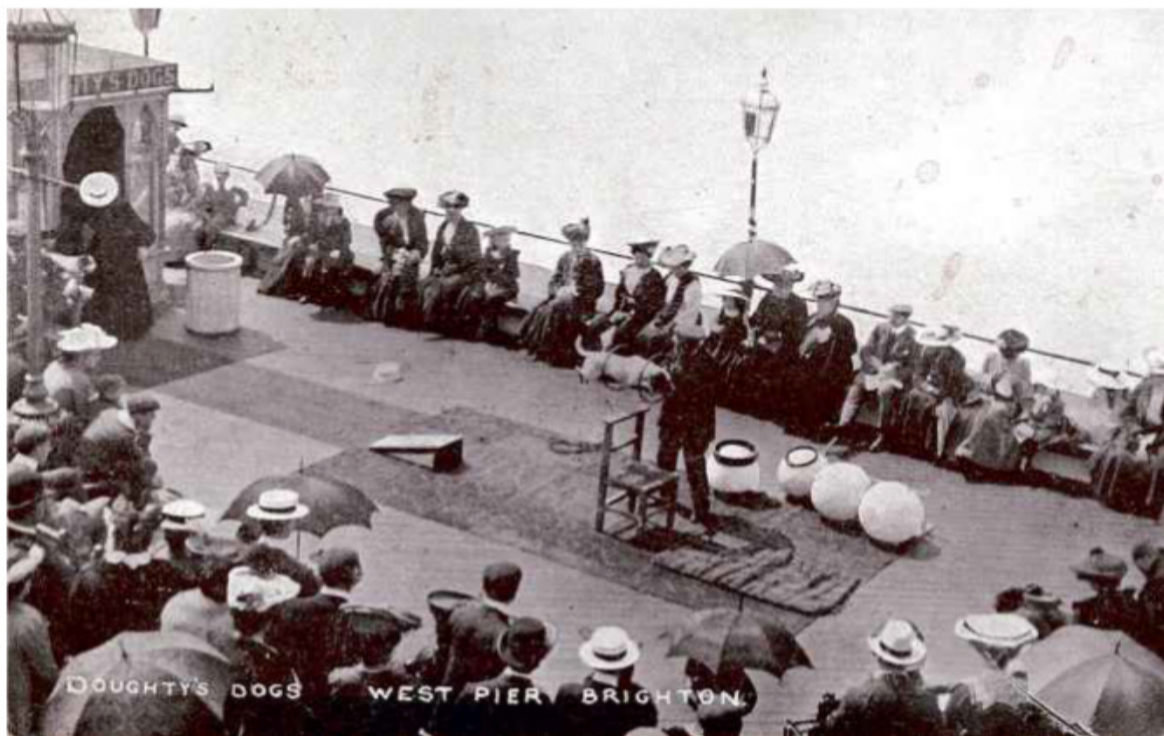
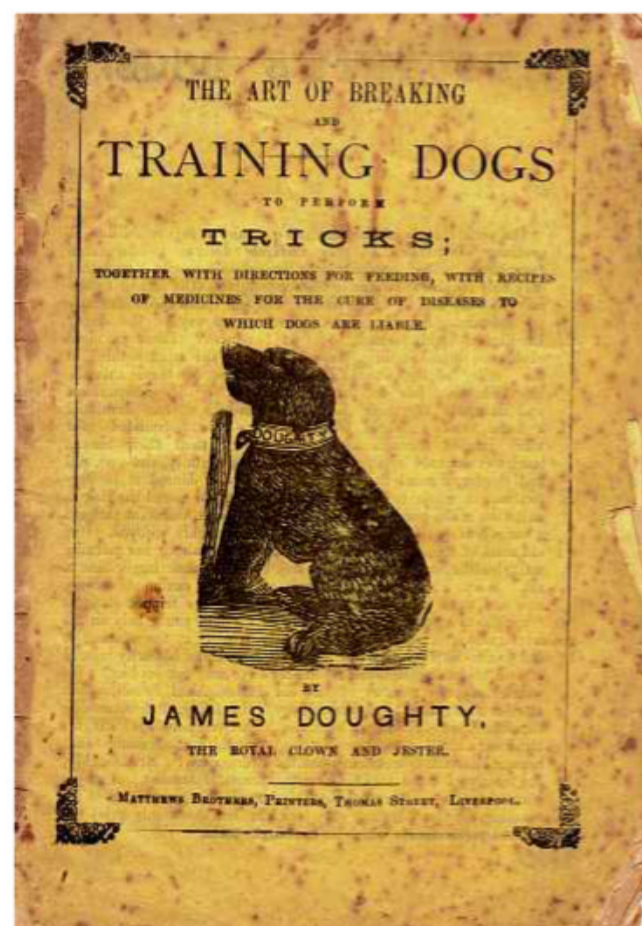
AGED 87 YEARS.

August 28th, 1905.



**AD** R. DOUGHTY has appeared at  
DRURY LANE 2 seasons.  
COVENT GARDEN 3 "  
STANDARD THEATRE 7 "  
And all the Provincial Theatres in Edinburgh,  
Liverpool, Manchester, Dublin, Bristol, Bath,  
&c., &c.

DOUGHTY'S DOGS, WEST PIER. Performed before the late Queen Victoria, Aug. 14, 1890.



**FACING PAGE:** James Doughty, Britain's oldest clown, photographed around 1912. **ABOVE LEFT:** A postcard stamped and posted in 1905, featuring the then 87-year-old Doughty. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The cover of a book by Doughty about the management of dogs. **ABOVE LEFT:** Doughty's Dogs performing at West Pier, Brighton, on a postcard stamped and posted in 1906. **ABOVE RIGHT:** A detail from a postcard sent in 1907 showing Doughty and one of his dogs.

oldest actor and clown. In 1908, he celebrated his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday by holding three benefit performances on West Pier. He was interviewed in the *Daily Mail*, declaring that after Grimaldi and himself, there had been no proper clowns in Britain. He sang his favourite comic song:

*A little old woman, a living she got*

*By selling of codlins, hot, hot, hot!*

*This little old woman, so have we been told,*

*Tho' her codlins were hot she was monstrously cold.*

*So to keep herself warm she thought it no sin  
To run and get half a quarter o...*

"Gin!" exclaimed the easily amused audience, laughing uproariously.

In 1909, Doughty was interviewed in the *Western Times*, declaring that he still felt youthful, although by now, his wife Margaret had to take him to the pier in a wheelchair. In 1910, he wrote to King George V, reminding him of the performance before Queen Victoria back in 1890, and receiving £3 from his

Majesty's privy purse. In early 1911, there was a collection in the *Daily Mail* for the benefit of Britain's oldest clown; since many people had shillings and sixpences to give, the elderly performer received close to £5 as a result.

Soon after, Margaret died aged 72, and the now 92-year-old James lost no time before remarrying the niece of his housekeeper, the 25-year-old Alice Zilpah Underwood. His friend Alfred Noyes wrote a poem to celebrate the nonagenarian bridegroom:

*It once was Drury Lane, sirs,*

*but now it's Brighton Pier*

*His wife she helped him down to it for many and many a year*

*Five weeks ago she died, sirs - he knows not what to do*

*You'll find you need a comrade when you come to ninety-two.*

Alice was to look after him in his old age, he declared, since he was now unable to perform with his dogs due to a troublesome rheumatic gout. After James Doughty died in early 1913, aged 94, his wife inherited all his worldly goods; she later remarried and had a family of her own.

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# WHY FORTEAN?



**FORTEAN TIMES** is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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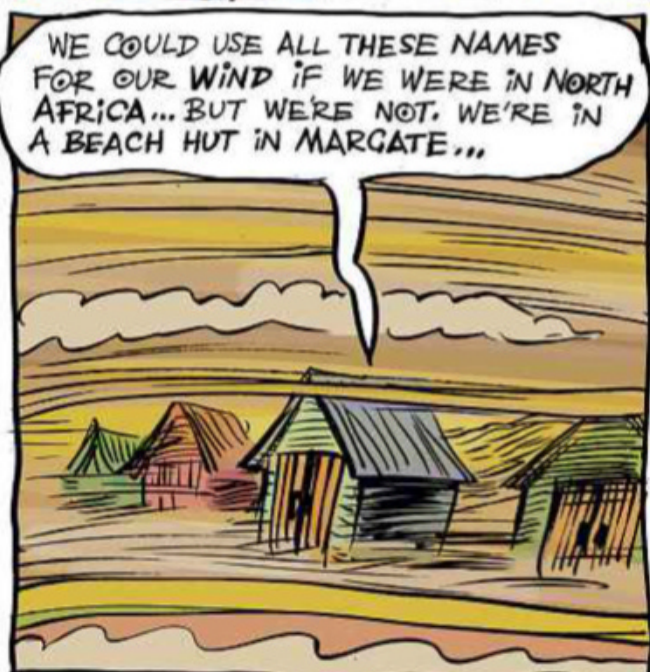
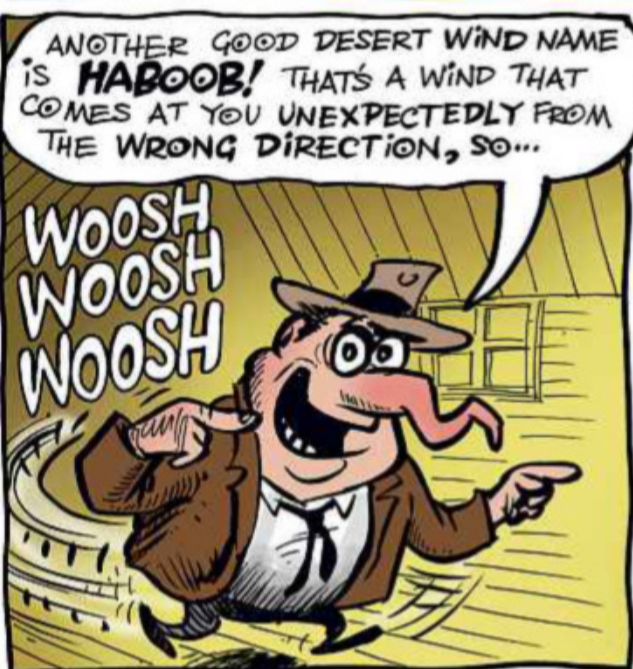
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# PHENOMENOMIX

HUNT EMERSON



# COMING NEXT MONTH



## FEAR & LOATHING IN NYC

LOVECRAFT, RACE, AND THE  
HORROR AT CLINTON STREET



## THE BELLS! THE BELLS!

SUNKEN VILLAGES AND  
PHANTOM CHURCH BELLS



DEATH BY SELFIE,  
TEMPLAR TREASURE,  
BRAZIL'S NEW AGERS  
AND MUCH MORE...

# FORTEAN TIMES 396

ON SALE 13 AUG 2020

# STRANGE DEATHS

## UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

Police in Florida arrested Sarah Boone, 42, for zipping her boyfriend Jorge Torres, 42, into a suitcase, recording his cries for help and leaving him until he died. She claimed she had been drinking and agreed it would be funny to use the suitcase in a game of hide-and-seek. *<i> 27 Feb 2020.*

Popular Russian blogger Ekaterina Didenko was celebrating her 29th birthday when her husband Valentin dumped 25kg (55lb) of dry ice into a swimming pool to create a steam show for Instagram snaps. Valentin, 32, died in hospital after suffering carbon dioxide poisoning while Natalie Monakova and Yuri Alferov, both 25, were declared dead at the Moscow pool and sauna complex on 28 February. Ekaterina was one of five revellers left in intensive care, while others suffered chemical burns. The mother of two is a pharmacist who advises her one million Instagram fans about medicines for home use. *Sunday People, 1 Mar 2020.*

Vampire obsessive Mathew Hardman, 17, murdered Mabel Leyshon, 90, then ripped out her heart and drank her blood. In December 2001, Hardman broke into Mrs Leyshon's Anglesey bungalow in the famously named village of Llanfairpwllgwyngyllogery-chwyrndrobwlantysiliogogogoch (otherwise known as Llanfair PG). He stabbed the 4ft 9in (1.5m) pensioner 22 times and, after lighting two candles, cut open her chest to remove her heart, placing it in a saucepan. He then drank blood from it, placing the saucepan on a silver platter on the floor next to a pair of pokers arranged in a cross.

Hardman had previously attacked a German exchange student after she had refused to bite his neck, an act he believed would make him immortal. He told detectives that by eating Mrs Leyshon's heart and drinking her blood, he would become immortal. "I like the idea of living forever," he told Detective Sergeant Iestyn Davies. "The thought of being immortal excites me." Prior to the murder, Hardman had been smoking skunk cannabis and searching the web for "vampires, gothic flesh eating and other macabre things". Another detective, Detective Superintendent Alan Jones, said Hardman had been like "the boy next door, very polite, shook my hand when I walked in the interview room...

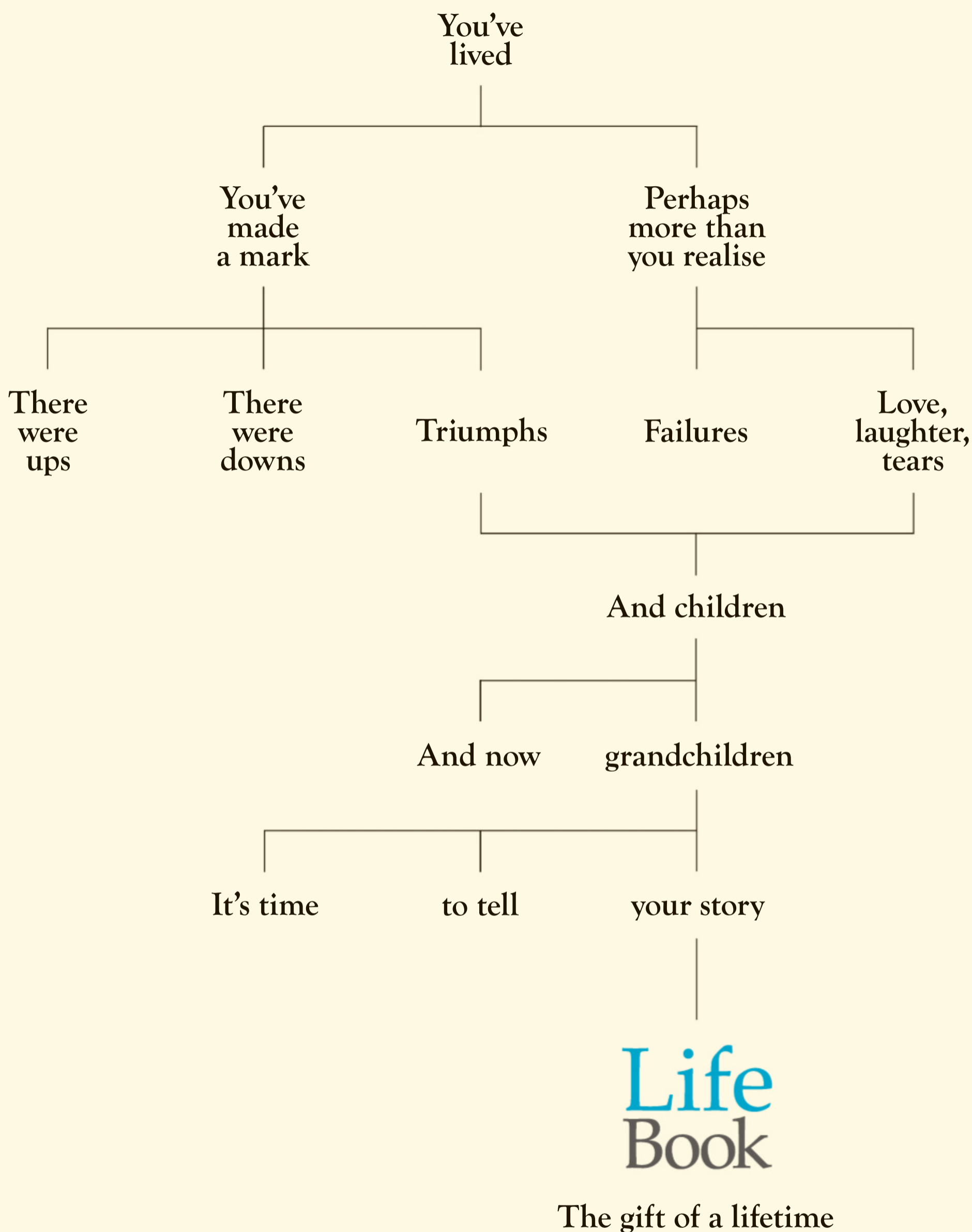
he had this incongruous smile." *S.Express, 5 Apr; S.People, 12 Apr 2020. D.Mirror, 23 Mar 2018.*

A grandmother displaying symptoms of coronavirus died after attempts to administer oxygen inadvertently caused an explosion, partially destroying her end-of-terrace Walsall home. On Easter Monday, Lynn Hadley, 67, was having difficulty breathing and emergency services were called. Paramedics attending the scene began oxygen treatment, but the oxygen tank exploded, setting light to the armchair she was sitting in. Mrs Hadley's husband Dave, daughter Kelly and granddaughter Mackenzie all escaped the blaze, along with the two paramedics, but Mrs Hadley herself, a wheelchair user, was unable to leave. By the time the paramedics went back in to rescue her, the fire had developed too much. She was later recovered from the armchair. An inquest heard the cause of death had been fatal burn injuries. *D.Express, 15 Apr; expressandstar.co.uk, 23 Apr 2020.*

A 32-year-old mother of two died of malnutrition after years of eating crisps, snacks and fizzy drinks. Even during her pregnancy, an inquest was told, Charlotte Broad lived only on "Irn Bru and Wotsits". Her partner of 10 years, Mark Darley, told the coroner's court: "She ate cheese and onion crisps, poppadoms and prawn crackers and that was it. She never ate anything else." He added that although he did not know the origin of her eating disorder, Ms Broad had been called 'fatty' at school. Her brother recalled: "She always ate strangely from a young age. She would have chicken nuggets and chips every day... but never any vegetables." She had been diagnosed with depression and an eating disorder in 2008, and despite numerous attempts by mental health workers to engage with her, had declined their services every time.

She was finally admitted to hospital in January 2019 after being bedridden for six weeks, but refused food and even nutrition via a drip. When doctors asked her if she understood the consequences of her actions, she responded: "I'm probably going to die." Two weeks after admission, she did. The coroner found that while Ms Broad did not "have intention to take her own life, she had ambivalence to living". *D.Mail, 14 Jan 2020.*





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